

The Woods Are Dark and Deep

by Blue Jeans

Category: Hakuoki/è-„æ;æé¬¼

Genre: Drama, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Chizuru Y., Kazama C.

Status: Completed

Published: 2012-02-28 22:05:39

Updated: 2012-05-06 17:05:10

Packaged: 2016-04-26 20:06:50

Rating: T

Chapters: 17

Words: 36,632

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: After Ezo, Chizuru Yukimura discovers that not all of her ghosts have been laid to rest. Follows after the end of Hakuoki: Demon of the Fleeting Blossom game. Mature themes. Yukimura x Kazama.

1. Chapter 1

****Disclaimer:**** This story and its characters are based on the English visual novel game, Hakuoki: Demon of the Fleeting Blossom. This doesn't really concern the anime though I have heard that they are very similar.

****Warning:**** This story will contain spoilers and continues on from where the Chikage Kazama story arc ends. It also takes elements from all the other story arcs, so there will be spoilers from all of them.

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><p>The Woods Are Dark and Deep

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><p>Chapter 1

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><p>In the aftermath of the kiss and his promise, I touched my lips, feeling his warmth linger. "Kazama-san...?"<p>

He smiled down at me silently. Slowly, I felt a smile touch my lips again, more naturally and more warmly this time than the last. My fingers fell away and I dropped my hand to my side. I looked up at

him in wonder, unable to mask the surprise on my face.

Finally, I blinked and shifted my gaze shyly away. My eyes landed on the flag I still cradled to my body. It broke me out of my dreamy daze and made me remember the reality of why I was here. Why, only moments ago, tears had fallen unendingly from my eyes and dried on my cheeks. Even now I could still feel the tracks they left behind.

"Kazama-san, do you know where...?" I paused, my voice stronger but still soft. I swallowed the pain and uncertainty and met his gaze again, taking strength in his presence. "Do you know where Hijikata-san... died?" I forced the last word out, trying to contain the tears and the sudden sadness that pierced me again with the reality of this loss. "C-can you show me?" I asked. With him by my side I could find the courage to do this. Perhaps, even this terrible goodbye could be said with dignity.

Kazama watched me, slowly blinking. I looked back, suddenly aware again of how long his lashes were and the shadows they casted upon his face. Finally, he nodded, not at all as hotly self-conscious as I suddenly felt. He turned, probably in the direction of Benten Fortress, where he had told me earlier that Hijikata was headed when the other was shot.

At first, I could only clutch at the torn fabric in my hands and stumble after Kazama, trying hard not to think of the past too much. A part of me did not want to cry any more in front of him, but a part of me could not help but remember the Shinsengumi in their blue-white jackets, patrolling the streets on days like this one.

This was a foreign place in comparison to Kyoto, but in the silence I remembered Saito's quiet patrols so vividly that I could almost feel him next to me. However, as the walk stretched on, I found myself looking around me and noting the differences. With each passing step, I realized that we were probably retracing Hijikata's last moments. Finally, Kazama stopped and waited for me to catch up to him.

"Here?" I asked, almost reverently, once I stopped beside him.

He surveyed the area, a thoughtful look on his face, and finally nodded. "I cannot guarantee this is the exact spot," Kazama acknowledged, his face impassive. He did not continue but I understood what he meant. Having been shot down from his horse on his way to aid Benten Fortress, Hijikata died along this road. While the exact spot was not certain now that some time has already passed, it was as likely as any other spot on this road where a shooter would have found Hijikata in range.

I crouched and touched the ground, closing my eyes briefly and holding the torn flag to my chest, I wanted to be indifferent to this once-frightening man who had kidnapped me and forced me to stay with the Shinsengumi. I also wanted to be angry. Angry at him for leaving me behind that fire-filled night, for probably thinking I had died that evening when canons and guns rained down on the Ministry. I wanted to be angry at him for dying alone... for dying at all. Yet, despite what I wanted, all I could feel was the regret of knowing his presence was truly gone from this world and that none of us had been there for him when it had happened.

To each of us in the Shinsengumi, we had all depended on him so much that it was impossible to think of the Shinsengumi without thinking of Hijikata. To realize that in the end, despite all that he had done for each of us and the organization, here was where he had passed on alone. It was a depressing thought. Even in the face of such adversity, Hijikata had never failed to give us his all-

I could feel the tears again, prickling my eyes.

Perhaps it was for Hijikata this feeling rose inside of me, or it may have been for the dream of the Shinsengumi that he embodied till his dying breath, but now he was truly gone. With him and his imposing presence fading into the air around us, I knew that my days living within that dream were also over. The past was scattered to the winds and most of those pieces were claimed by death, never to resurrect itself again except in memory.

I finally managed to blink back the tears.

I wasn't angry anymore that he had left or sad that he had died alone, instead, I prayed. Someday, I silently wished, perhaps in a different life, Hijikata-san, I hope we can meet again. I hope to walk beside you again, beside the Shinsengumi again. To me, you would always embody the honor and the courage of the samurai spirit.

I raised my face to the sky and opened my eyes. Looking up, I saw the crimson spreading overhead. I looked at the last thing he must have seen in this life as he died on the cold ground and hoped that my prayers would reach him when I had not been able to when he needed me most.

Kazama waited patiently for me to finish. The wind was getting chillier and the night was coming on. The sky darkened and I finally rose, looking to him after I straightened. "I'm ready," I told him, surprised to hear my voice as steady as it sounded. I had said my important goodbyes and it was time now, to start a new life. Hijikata would expect no less of me.

He smiled at my tone and turned. When I dusted off my jacket, I trailed off after him as he led me back to the inn we were staying at while on this trip. Like he had said earlier, preparations have already been made on his behalf to scatter his clan into hiding so that while he still knew where to find his people, the humans would have difficulties tracking them down.

To deter the humans from tracking me and confirming my identity as a female demon, he revealed that he had left Amagiri with a letter for Sen. "You can meet up with her in Edo, that is where Amagiri was headed and her last known whereabouts. I have informed her that you would stay there and wait for her." Kazama told me all of it that evening over dinner. "I know that you two have become friends." His smile showed his approval. "I still have business that will separate us for a while and I will be leaving for the mainland tomorrow, but as soon as I am done dealing with the humans, I will join you there. Right now, it is safer for you to be with others like us as quickly as possible. Do you have a place to stay to wait for her?"

I thought immediately of my home in Edo. I did not want to go back, but if worse comes to worse, I could stay there. I could also go see

Dr. Matsumoto, who had previously extended an invitation to visit him whenever I was in Edo. I knew, if I went there that I would be alright. "Yes," I answered Kazama, and then I informed him of my thoughts on the matter. "How will Sen find me?" I wondered.

Kazama only smiled. "She will. That you do not need to concern yourself with."

He fell into silence again, thinking. I had realized earlier that Kazama had not wanted the humans to see us interact any more than necessary. Granted, his earlier kiss had been somewhat of a surprise especially because of this. Already my presence was causing some worry on his end. I never realized, until this moment, the different qualities to Kazama's silence.

Always I had been preoccupied with either my previous perceptions of him from the past or with my thoughts concerning the Shinsengumi. Now, I was free to be aware of him, the Kazama of the present. This time, in my eyes, Kazama was without the shadows of the past hanging off of his gestures and words.

I felt my cheeks heat again at the intensity of his gaze when our eyes met but nodded acknowledgement to his instructions on what boat and coach to take to get me to Edo. While Kazama had clearly stated earlier that he would let me think over his proposal, I did not doubt his sincerity or his determination.

Ever since that kiss I could also not doubt that my heart skipped a beat every time our eyes met. Granted, while I sometimes still found him to be incredibly arrogant, he was never ill-meaning nor as evil as I had first thought him when we had met. In fact, Kazama was a lot like the men of the Shinsengumi, Hijikata especially. He'd probably be insulted if I ever voiced this observation, but the fact is Kazama was probably just as stiffly honorable and strict with his morals as Hijikata was on his worst days. In fact, Hijikata's nickname in the Shinsengumi was rapidly taking on a whole new meaning for me the longer I spent time with Kazama.

On our last trip to Edo and from Edo to Ezo, despite spending a lot of time together, we had spent the majority of the trip not really talking to each other. Amagiri's presence was appreciated up until now, but I was slowly realizing it made no difference. Kazama had kept mostly to himself, and I had a lot on my mind anyway. Over time, I had started to relax around him more and more, trusting him to not harm me and to keep me safe from human interference. However, I felt now as if I was actually looking at him as a man. Well, maybe not a man, but a grown male who... who kissed me. I was seeing him for the first time and realizing that all this time, while I was right to fear him, I had also completely overlooked how attractive he was.

It was a good thing because it was probably a testament of how scary he could get when he wanted to be.

I was seeing him now, not as a demon or a traveling companion, but as someone who could come to mean so much more to me.

I tried to hide the shock of my revelations as best as I could while we went over some of his plans, but Kazama had always been too observant for comfort and I wasn't sure how successful my attempt was. Finally, as the moon rose high in the sky, he gave me two

traveling tickets and a letter. At least I assumed it was a letter. The sheet of paper was slipped in with my tickets and I queried him with a look before unfolding it. I flattened the sheet, suspicious of the glint in his eyes as he watched me do it.

When I saw what it was, my eyes narrowed and I couldn't help but shoot him a glare.

He had, apparently, drew me a map of both how to get to the port from where we were currently residing, and a second map of how to find a travelling coach company that would be headed for Edo. When I looked up this time, I caught a fleeting smirk on his lips before it disappeared into unsmiling innocence. "I didn't want you to get lost," he said in that dead-pan voice that hid any humor that continued to sparkle in his eyes.

He raised a challenging brow, but all I could do was frown at him. After all, how could I begrudge him for trying to be helpful, though I begrudged him quite a bit for the amusement he was getting out of it. While I had been oblivious to Kazama's habits and thoughts, he seemed to have accurately observed some of my own failings.

Even after living in Kyoto for almost three years, the Shinsengumi were always amazed at how easily I could get lost in the city. Even when delivering messages to the most common of places, so long as I was not familiar with it, I would usually get hopelessly lost. Eventually, Hijikata would have to send someone after me to lead me to my destination and then back to head-quarters. It had gotten to the point that Hijikata had just taken up the habit of drawing maps for me whenever he knew it wasn't going to be a straight-line from the Shinsengumi's to wherever I was going. As much as it gulled me to admit it, I was hopelessly bad with figuring out where I was without landmarks I could recognize and I was always thankful for the maps. This time, however, I couldn't help but be put off by Kazama's smugness, knowing he was well aware of my surprise at his rather accurate observation.

"Thank you," I finally managed to ground out reluctantly and tucked everything away. While I had been sad at the thought of parting from him earlier, all of a sudden I couldn't wait to get away. Seeing my ire, Kazama finally stopped trying to hide his smile. It was a very attractive but irritating smile, and he must have had an inkling concerning the root of my growing annoyance because he was still smiling when he finally got up to lead me to my room.

I was beginning to miss the past when Kazama would go for days on end without so much as quirking his lips once in my direction.

When we parted that night, Kazama had looked at me for a long, uncomfortable moment as we stood in front of my room. It was almost as if he was memorizing my face. I wanted to look away at first because it had felt so intimate, but I quickly realized that I might also not see him for some time, as well. This thought allowed me to let go of my earlier feelings of irritation and embarrassment.

I looked back up at him.

Shyly, I traced the line the moonlight left along his face and tried to remember the shade of his skin under the warm glow the lamp light. I wasn't bold enough to hold his gaze for long, but I held on to the

image of him at that moment as best as I could. The soft strands of his hair framing his face, the strength in his gaze looking back at me, the thinness of his lips showing how unhappy he was at our parting that reflected how I felt as well, and the shadows along the muscles along his lean neck as my eyes slid down his chest to come to rest on his elegant fingers resting on his belt, near his katana. I tried to remember all of this, but I wasn't sure if my memory could ever do him justice. His presence was just so strong, even when it had stopped being so terrifying.

"I will see you as soon as this is over," he promised again.

I blinked, almost as if in a dream as my gaze swept up and lingered on his lips, too shy to do more than hope. "Th-thank you, Kazama-san," I finally said softly instead, unable to say goodbye and unable to do more than wonder if he would kiss me again. I had said enough goodbyes this day and I knew I would see him again. The kiss... it burned its memory into me, making me wonder when the next one would come and how it might be the same... how it might be different.

He didn't kiss me again, instead he tilted his head to study me. I knew I could trust his words. I would see him again. Kazama was not a man to go back on his promises nor was he one to lie, these were the first qualities I recognized in him and the first ones I truly liked and admired about him. It was how I had come to trust him, really.

"Good night," he said gently, "Chizuru," he added with only the slightest pause of hesitation. It sounded as if he tasted my name as he spoke it. Even though he had said already that we were not strangers, even though he had kissed me in broad daylight, in public where anyone could have seen, my name on his lips was more intimate than anything he could have done up to that point. I blushed again and hoped that the lamp light would not show it as clearly as I felt it, but I also didn't refuse the warm familiarity in his words or the gentleness in his voice.

"Go-good night... Chikage," I answered, almost in a whisper. I gave him a final shy smile and entered my room.

That night, I held that last moment close to my heart. The warm glow from the memory of his voice allowed me to not cry in the dark, despite the goodbyes I had to say to the past in the light of the day.

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><p>To be continued...

2. Chapter 2

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

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><p>Chapter 2

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><p>While the trip to Edo again had been mostly uneventful, it did not end as well as I had hoped. A wheel on the carriage broke and the passengers were told to wait at a nearby village only a short walk away. This would have been fine, considering that the village would have had better accommodations and entertainment, but as we neared I began to feel dread rise up inside me.<p>

The first sign that something was wrong was when I noticed the crows circling overhead in the direction of where the village was supposed to be. Their cacophonous voices and their numbers were a loud shout to my senses that something was wrong and, having been near battlefields in the aftermath rather more recently than I would have liked, I had come to dread what their appearances entailed. The closer we got, the more I could feel the solidifying confirmation of the dread I felt. The other passengers also slowed, apprehensive about the birds overhead and the silent road, void of any passers-by and the rising voices of a bustling village.

"Are you sure this is the location of the village?" I overhead one passenger ask another in a low voice.

"The driver pointed this way," another answered anxiously in return, as quietly as the one who started the conversation. He sounded like he wanted to be wrong though and there was a soft rumble of heightened agitation that was quickly silenced.

No one wanted to talk louder than in a hushed tone. Something felt like danger, though I did not feel any killing intent nearby. My hand tightened around my wakizashi and that was when we found the first victim.

It definitely looked like the remains of a male farmer by the cut of his clothing, though it was drenched a crusted, coppery color from the blood that came from multiple stab-wounds. My stomach roiled at the sight and the smell. It could have been the work of any brigand of ronins, I tried to convince myself. Even with the war just over, there was a lot of soldiers returning home, or not, in this case, returning anywhere at all. Many ronins wandered, lawlessly cutting down those who would not give them what they wanted. It was, in a way, much as Kyoto would have been without the iron-hand of the Shinsengumi before the war.

As we got in sight of the houses, I could no longer deny what my eyes were seeing. Each villager was brutally murdered, the closer we got to the town, the more violently they were cut down. Most were unrecognizable now if one were to look down the town's main road, but I could see that all were in pieces, even though most of those pieces were already carried off by the birds and other wild animals.

I had heard of this before. It was as terrifying as I had imagined it would be when Hijikata had begun to receive notices of the murders happening in Kyoto. Even then, we had all suspected Sanan, though no one really had the courage or the desire to say it out loud.

I didn't want to go any further, and in fact, several travelers had long stopped or turned back. But I had to know. Were there any survivors? It was still light out, so I tried to take courage in

that.

I wanted to so desperately deny it, but memories of that first night when I met Okita, Saito and Hijikata flooded my mind as I walked further into the small village. The dark street. Those crazed eyes, red with blood lust staring straight through me. The smell of fear and the terrified screams. My own horror as the mad-men neared, bodies littered behind them. Here was that night, a hundred times worse and no matter where I turned I only saw death and destruction. So much of it flooded my senses that I wanted to cover my face and weep, I wanted to look away.

But I continued until I reached the end of the town and knew...

Everyone was dead. Men. Women. Children. No matter their age or gender, all were cut to pieces.

Every single one was dead.

I had thought Amagiri and Kazama had annihilated my father's abominations that day. The day my father died, I had told Kazama that I was responsible for what he had done, but even then Kazama had spared me the pain of taking responsibility. That day felt like a knife in my heart, even though it seemed, more than ever, as if it were a life time ago. If I was responsible then, I was responsible now. There could be no doubt concerning what had done this.

Despite my desire to deny it, we were wrong to think that the furies were gone for good. I was wrong to hope that it would mean the end of the nightmare that had led me to the Shinsengumi.

I was so, so wrong...

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><p>To be continued...

3. Chapter 3

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep ****

by Blue Jeans

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><p>Chapter 3

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><p>The remainder of the trip was a terrified blur. I had walked back the same way the other passengers had already gone. I stood apart from them a little, numbly recalling what I had seen even though I didn't want to. I tried to distract myself by watching them huddle as close to the coach as they could without getting yelled at by the men still working on fixing the wheel, but it didn't help. So I just stood there and breathed shallowly, trying to get the stench of death out of my nose even though the wind would not blow my memories away along with it...<p>

A few of the passengers were mad with fear enough to attempt to get on a horse and ride away. Most were just willing to do anything to speed up the process of fixing that wheel and leaving. If it weren't for the fact that everyone was all too aware that they didn't know if what did that to the village was still out there, I would have guessed most would have ventured down the road on their own just to get away. We definitely would have lost a horse or two to some of the more hysterical travellers if the coming night and the promise of worse to come should anyone be found alone did not stay them.

I didn't know if knowing what did this was better or worse, but I doubt my face was any different than the people around me.

When we finally rumbled off, passing by the town with no moon out, no one dared to lift the curtains to look out at the town. Frankly, I felt bad for the drivers who had to stay out there after what they had heard from the passengers who came back. I was mostly alternating between the feelings of depression and fear as we continued. The fear was not hard to feel considering the fact that it sat cold and heavy in the coach for the remainder of the trip, silencing any earlier conversations or cheer. The depression was largely due to the fact that I knew. Unlike everyone else, I knew what did this. I was not just another ignorant traveler, wishing to be home with family again once this trip was over. I was the party who was responsible for this massacre, albeit indirectly.

I also knew it wasn't over. I knew this with a certainty that made it hard to catch my breath at times.

All those terrifying encounters when I had crossed paths with Sanan after he took the Water of Life flooded my mind. I remembered my first time, stumbling onto the Corps after they had lost to the blood-lust. In the darkened coach I relived the terror over and over, the sight, the feel and the smell of blood swamping my senses. I could have been like any of those victims in that village if Okita and Saito had not shown up that night, Hijikata saving me from Okita's ruthlessness but appearing no safer when he did. Now, there were no more Shinsengumi to protect me from the dark. Now, there were no more demons on my side to deal out punishment to those who crossed the line.

In those ripped up pieces of flesh, I saw myself. I saw all the lives cut short. I saw their terror and felt their screams.

When the coach finally reached Edo, all the passengers tumbled out, one after the other. After the drivers unloaded and everyone got their luggage, the travelers scattered. I gripped my suit-case tightly and stood on the platform under the sun for a long moment, watching them run away as if the shadow of the furies followed their footsteps still.

Where would I go? I wondered. Where could I make the most difference?

While I had planned to stay with Dr. Matsumoto when I had left Ezo, now that I knew there were still furies out there, I knew I had to go back to my home. I was so tired, having been unable to sleep after what I had seen, but if I went home then I would not be able to rest. Knowing what I knew, I would not be able to close my eyes under that

roof. If I don't go right away... could I live with myself?

Every moment I am not searching for answers, another victim or another village of victims may fall to the blade of the furies unchecked. Without Kazama or Amagiri, I was rather useless if I came upon them. Without research, I would not know if there was another way to stop them.

I wanted to just sit on the platform and close my eyes. I would have cried if I had more strength. I would have screamed if it would alleviate the fear and pain constricting my lungs and sitting coldly in my belly like a stone. Instead, I stepped off the stairs and turned in the direction of the mail office.

I could not wait, but it was still wiser to send a message to Dr. Matsumoto to let him know that I was in town and where I was staying. I wanted someone to be there for me, but I could not delay the research. I assured myself that when he got the message he would come looking for me. I would not be long in that house by myself. I would not have to read about furies and think about furies in my old home, by myself, with my father's notes...

I shuddered.

When the message was finally sent, I turned down the road and headed for my childhood home.

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><p>To be continued...

4. Chapter 4

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

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><p>Chapter 4

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><p>It was the sound of the door sliding opened that woke me. Despite my trepidations, I had simply been too exhausted to stay awake. By the time I had cleaned my father's work space a little and settled down to go through his numerous notes, I had barely finished piling them together before my eyes shut and my head lulled.<p>

I hadn't even started reading a single page.

At first, waking up in his study disoriented me so much I thought Father was coming in with tea. I thought it was another time, when I would sometimes sit by him into the night as he read over his work and took down notes. I must have simply fallen asleep, I thought. Sometimes, when I was younger and scared of some nightmare that might have woken me up in the middle of the night, I would do this. For a moment I even forgot how old I was.

"Father-?" I said, turning with blurry eyes towards the door.

I blinked in surprise at the person silhouetted there. The same face stared back at me. Her short hair framed the same jaw and the same eyes narrowed at me in amusement. Here was a face I had seen in the reflection of mirrors, puddles and lakes, wearing an expression I have never worn. It was a face much more familiar now, without the jeweled hair and the expertly painted lips and eyes.

"Ka-Kaoru-san?" I blinked.

What was Nagumo Kaoru doing here? The last time I had seen her was with Okita. The thought was a little painful, for I had not seen Okita in some time. The last time I had seen him, he had been too weak to move from his bed and was being sent to Osaka to see Dr. Matsumoto for treatment. Heisuke had teased Okita once, long ago, on our first meeting with Kaoru. He had been certain that she must have harbored a crush on Okita for saving her from the ronins. Okita, even then, had only slyly replied that Heisuke must not have known anything about women if that's what the other thought.

Okita... he had always been far too clever for his own good.

"You're alive," Kaoru noted, her voice was as gentle and as elegant as I remembered. There was a cold glitter in her eyes and I wasn't sure if it was due to disappointment or relief. She had said it so flatly, it was hard to read it as relief.

There was no doubt that this was the person I'd met that day in Kyoto. Her hair was shorter now, brushing her shoulders instead of elegantly tied up atop of her head. She was no longer wearing the beautiful kimono I had envied her for and her face was devoid of makeup. The dark jacket, the utilitarian pants... She looked ready to battle. She looked, in fact, very much like a boy.

I wanted to ask why she was here. There was a lot I wanted to ask but her smile, so coldly cutting, stopped me. I felt that same uneasy slither down my spine and it was a feeling I had thought to feel no more after the war had ended. However, no one could spend time with the Shinsengumi and not know what that feeling meant.

It was the killing intent.

I rose as quickly as I could with my legs screaming in protests, pins stabbing my limbs. They had fallen asleep beneath me and it was all I could do not to fall over or shudder at the sensation of using them now. I tried to steady myself, my hand wearily resting on the hilt of my kodachi. Kaoru's smile became an indulgent smirk, but she did not reach for the katana on her hip. I wasn't fooled by her inaction and I did not relax, not after having lived with swordsmen like Saito. Instead, I watched her lean against the doorway and study me, as if it were perfectly natural for her to be in my father's study. "Have you still not remembered who I am even though I have come all this way to help you, little sister?" Kaoru asked, looking almost hurt.

I glared at her and then I blinked.

Wait... did she just say _little sister_?

I paused, my hand convulsed around the hilt of my wakizashi as I

looked at her with wide-eyed surprise. My mouth dried and I swallowed audibly. "Wh-what?" I asked stupidly. "I- Father never said anything about... Wa-wait, what?"

Kaoru looked regretfully away. "When our family refused to help overthrow the Shogunate and was destroyed, you were taken in by Kodo-san and I was taken in by the Nagumo family from the Tosa Domain. We were... separated." She looked, almost sad.

I had known already that Kodo was not my real father. However, I never asked Kazama about what happened to my real family or even who they were. I had always been a little scared to find out. A part of me will always think of Kodo as my father, and I had thought, when the war was over, I would have time enough to sort out my feelings and find out about my past. After all, it would not change no matter when I went looking for it.

I swallowed the million questions running in my head. It was true then, our real parents were dead. It was the most likely possibility, but even then I had carried a small hope that I had only been abandoned and that they were out there somewhere. I had thought there might have been a small hope, that someday I might even get the chance to find them.

"I'm sorry," Kaoru apologized, watching my face. "I have also lied to you about my gender as well," Kaoru added, almost lazily. I blinked at her- him. So, this beautiful other me was really my brother. I had still thought, until then, that he was a girl, dressed like a boy, as I was.

There was only one question that I should know now. "Why are you here?" I asked, slowly and carefully.

Kaoru looked disappointed at my response, though I was not sure of the cause. "Do you still not trust me?" he asked as he straightened.

I was compulsively opening my mouth to disagree, just to not seem rude, when I saw him draw his katana out, sheath and all. "If you don't believe our similar face, perhaps you would believe in my sword." He raised a brow at me in inquiry as I stared at him uncomprehendingly. "My Daitsuren is the companion of your own Shotsuren. They were separated, along with us."

I could not deny, just by looking at the katana in his hand that it was truly the other half of my set. I did not want to believe that, of all things, my father had kept this from me. But, in the light of things, I could not deny that surely Kaoru and I were connected, the way his katana and my wakizashi were connected. However, that was not what I had trouble accepting at all. He must have mistook my question for what it was.

"Why would I not want to help my little sister stop the furies? Even the strongest of humans, even the Shinsengumi, would be helpless against a horde of them," He spoke to me with the such a sincere look on his face that I felt bad for putting my hand on my wakizashi. So he knew. He knew about the furies too.

Maybe... maybe he could help me.

Even though there were unanswered questions still, there was no doubt Kaoru was related to me. I let down my guard then and let go of my blade. Kaoru had shocked me into realizing that I wasn't the last of my clan. It was... a relief. I had been worried over how I would stop the furies ever since I had learned they were not completely wiped out. Maybe, with Kaoru's help, we could finally put an end to my family's sin.

I could... have a family again.

It was, perhaps, the most careless thing I had done until then. Not knowing his reason for what he said, and trusting him simply because we shared the same blood... I had made similar mistakes like this before, in the past.

In the blink of an eye, he was suddenly there, and I realized then that up close, there were subtle differences to his features. A sharpness to the edges of his eyes and a harshness to the press of his lips that I never had. I never wore such an expression tinged with so much bitterness and mockery, and I hoped I never would.

"Welcome home, little sister," he whispered lovingly as he drove his katana into my gut, watching my face hungrily as my eyes widened in pain.

"Chizuru-chan!" a voice interrupted us then. "Are you home? Is anyone home?"

My mouth opened, but I could barely stand the pain let alone scream.

It hurt so much...

I almost missed the tick of annoyance on Kaoru's face as I stared at him in shock. My hands grasped at his jacket as I clung to him to stay upright. I could not respond except a hoarse cry of pain as he twisted the blade inside of me, pushing it further into me before jerking it out roughly.

For a long moment my world went white and I couldn't even breathe. My body trembled like a leaf from the pain while I felt like I was choking on my screams.

"How could you have hoped to stop the furies as you are now, little sister?" he asked with a disappointed shake of his head.

I could only look at his feet as I collapsed. Was it my imagination or was there blood on his hands when I had briefly glimpsed them? It was, probably, my own blood. Our shared blood.

There was so much blood.

It stained the tatami mats of my father's study and the western clothes Kazama had given me.

My hand convulsively clutched at the hole Kaoru left behind, trying to staunch the blood that was spreading with each shuddering breath I took. I found myself sitting, barely able to think around the pain but still able to feel the weight of his gaze on my head. The silence

stretched as I struggled to breath, fighting myself against curling up around the wound.

Finally, tenderly, he reached down and tilted my chin up so our eyes could meet. Even the voice outside could not rush him and I knew then that he savored my pain. "Till we meet again, little sister," Kaoru said, almost affectionately as he gently wiped the line of blood trailing down my chin from my mouth, smearing it on my skin. I had bit myself to stop the cries of pain and the swelling of tears, fearful of what he would do the person who would come in and interrupt us now. Still, despite my efforts, I could not help stop the small noises I made as every movement he forced upon me was agony. He looked into my eyes, as if trying to imprint how I looked at that moment. "Next time, I hope you have a better expression on your face to show me."

He smiled down at me and it was all the more frightening in its gentleness. Then he let me go and stood, casually cleaning his hands on a handkerchief as he walked away. I felt my head drop, my neck too tired to hold it up now that his fingers were gone, and I saw dazedly that one of my hands was still pressed against my stomach. It would heal, I knew it would despite the pain, for it was not a fatal wound. It would still take a while longer than a day to heal completely but it would heal. While this was far from the scratches I was used to getting, I was still a demon.

Who knew my ability would become handy now? Or that one could hurt so badly from such a wound? Briefly, I remembered the scar on Harada's stomach and how Shinpachi always got the other to boastfully joke about it. I had new respect for Harada then, who was far from being a demon and still healed from his wound with a triumphant smile. Somehow, I doubted that I would ever boast of surviving this.

Thoughts of the Shinsengumi gave me strength. I forced myself to look up when I heard the rustling of paper and realized then that Kaoru was not gone. In fact, he had walked over to the desk where I had been sitting earlier. In his hands I saw that he had gathered the notes my father had left behind, the same ones I had spent so much of yesterday and earlier today collecting. I found my voice then as he looked down at me in that same way that Okita had often looked at me when I had first been abducted by the Shinsengumi. It was a look that was completely indifferent to whether if I lived or died; a look with no compassion or feeling. Granted, Okita's eyes always held a hint of ironic humor, which was also what made him so scary at first. Kaoru's face had not even a glimmer of what could be called humor on it and, until now, I didn't realize how much more terrifying it could be without it. His visage might as well have been made out of stone, his eyes as hallow as dark pits.

"No!" I cried hoarsely, reaching out as if I could stop him with will alone. Even then, the little strength I had mustered from memories and fear was not enough and it had only managed to make me hurt more as my supporting arm lost strength and I collapsed bodily onto the floor. I lost my breath for a moment, and possibly consciousness. Still, I could not look away when my eyes finally cleared, but it was already too late. I was always too late.

He even had time to wait for me to see him again, to look back at my pitiful form and thank me for my earlier efforts of putting the notes

together. My futile attempt to stop him had only caused him to smile. It was a smile that chilled me to my heart. And then, he was gone.

The pounding of feet on the wooden floor thundered and was ignored as I stared in horror at the place where my brother had stood. He had disappeared with my father's notes.

"My lady, over here!"

I could barely register the voices while I lay there contemplating the possibilities of Kaoru possessing those notes. Hands suddenly clamped around my shoulders, lifting and turning me. I finally turned my gaze and blankly stared at a face I felt I should have recognized.

"Chizuru-chan! Chizuru-chan! What happened?" That voice was so desperate, the hands trying hard to be gentle.

I blinked and the tone pulled me momentarily from the haze. Worried eyes stared into my own. "Sen?" I whispered, tasting the blood again inside of my mouth. I shaped her name as recognition finally registered who I was looking at. My voice failed me from saying more and then I was lost again as I saw the dark courtyard over her shoulder from the opened door.

In that moment, I could not help but look through her to see the future full of furies coming to life in the darkness outside.

In the midst of that hallucination, I saw Kaoru standing alone. He looked right back at me, smiling at me with that same smile that was more cutting than the katana he had twisted inside of me. "Next time," he promised me. The shadows surged around him, obscuring my view of him at last. A million red eyes blazed with blood-lust and burned themselves into me, rushing towards me, their shouts of hunger drowning out the bloodied world.

I couldn't even scream as they came upon me.

Instead, I fainted.

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><p>To be continued...

5. Chapter 5

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

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><p>Chapter 5

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><p>I was confined to my bed for three days. Sen would not hear of me getting up earlier than that, despite the desperation that grew

within me with each passing hour. When I regained consciousness on the evening of the first day after what had happened, Sen had been the one to greet me with a fierce frown and some choice words for my irresponsibility.<p>

"My lady was worried for you," Kimigiku said with her soft, lilting voice. Sen countered that someone obviously needed to be worried for me before she forced some medicine down my throat. After sending Kimigiku to inform Dr. Matsumoto of my condition, she had ordered me back to sleep.

When I woke up again the next morning, she was still there. Kimigiku was nowhere to be seen and we were alone. "Why didn't you wait for me?" Sen finally asked softly in the morning light.

I probably should have. Looking back, I realized it wasn't the most practical move I had ever made. After some rest and knowing the circumstances of my choices, a lot of my earlier decisions had seemed rather foolish.

"I didn't know," I finally admitted. It was true. At the time, I hadn't known that Kaoru would come or that he was even a threat. I had completely forgotten about the girl with the same face as my own... Well, at least I had thought he was a girl at the time. I hadn't even known I had a brother until Kaoru revealed this fact. I didn't know that he would know about the furies nor that he would seek to acquire my father's research.

I had only thought that if I could get to my father's research as quickly as possible, somehow, in some way, I would have a better chance to stop those monsters from ever hurting another person again. Emotionally and physically exhausted, I had not made the best choices. However, I had sent a message to Dr. Matsumoto for a completely different reason, which was how Sen found me as quickly as she had.

Kaoru Nagumo, my brother. Who was he and why was he doing this? There were a lot of things I still wanted to ask him, though I did not know if I could or if he would tell me the truth. Even having only met him briefly, I sensed a deep darkness within him. It was only glimpses, but after he had stabbed me I doubt I was wrong in what I saw. Despite the pain and exhaustion that had impaired much of my judgment, his actions were rather hard to ignore even if his words had been as slippery and as elegant as he had been when he pretended to be a girl.

"Sen," I implored after I rose later on that day, despite her protests. "Could you tell me what you know about the Yukimura family?" My family. My clan. But it was hard to feel that way about people one did not even remember and knew nothing about.

I had already told her what had happened that morning. She knew it was my brother who had attacked me. We were both unsure why he had hurt me as badly as he had, even though it was not a death blow. His motives were so clouded I did not know where to start to figure him out.

He was up to something, but that was as far as we got.

Sen studied me for a long moment and then sighed. "What do you wish

to know?"

"I only know we, the Yukimura clan, opposed the Shogun," I said softly. In fact, all I knew about my clan was based entirely on what Kaoru had told me. My father had not lived long enough to pass any information on to me, and I doubted that he was in the right mind to do it when we had met up again.

Sen looked thoughtful, as if choosing her words carefully. "As demons, we have long disassociated ourselves with the human world. We had mostly scattered, not wanting to involve ourselves with the quarrels that humans so easily got into. At that time, we still lived in groups, though mostly in secluded areas." Sen touched my hand then and clasped it in her own. I felt her sharing her strength with me. "The Shogunate had located the Yukimura village, your village, Chizuru. They sent an envoy asking for aid for one of their many quarrels. When your family politely refused but showed no aggression, they had thought that was the end of it. But instead, they were attacked. The Shogunate decided to make an example of them... To send a message to all the other clans that no matter how powerful the demons were, in the end, we were not the ones to decide whether or not aid would be provided. The request had never really been a request, instead it was a command and we were expected to follow. Refusing to do so was considered an act of rebellion against the Shogun himself and would be punishable by death. Only three people survived that night... Kodo-san, you and your brother. No one surrendered that night except Kodo-san, Chizuru. Perhaps he did it to spare you and your brother's lives. Perhaps he did it to save his own. Who is to say? Your brother didn't want to be spared though, so he was smuggled away to live with the Nagumo in Tosa where it was deemed that he would have better chances of surviving. Everyone else was killed."

Sen's face was one of both anger and sadness. In it, I had also seen pride. "As you must realize, the Kazama clan went to the Satsuma Domain to ask for help immediately upon hearing about what had happened. They secured their own safety in exchange for a promised debt. They knew the Satsuma clan deeply hated the Shogunate and resented his rule. Others followed suit, seeking help from the Choshu and Tosa Domains, those who also despised the Shogun and his rule, each demon clan promising to help in the future in return for obscurity. My own clan was spared because of our ties with Tamuramaro Sakanoue, which gave us enough time to scatter into hiding as well. In the end, we demons did learn the lesson that humans were indeed too dangerous to trust with anything concerning the knowledge of demons. While we could not wipe their memories of us, we could certainly make it as difficult as possible to locate any one demon much less a group. My clan hid instead of seeking aid, for we no longer wanted to be indebted to humans ever again. We were small enough to do so, but most of the other clans like Kazama-sama's would not have been able to. It was galling though, for we were all certain now that such powers in the hands of humans would one day mean involving ourselves in their wars again."

I remembered then Kazama's utter dislike of humans, even those in the Satsuma clan that he worked for. He had sneered at them, claiming that all they knew was to seek after money, power and fame. Even though I had thought he disregarded the sanctity of life itself at that time, I was realizing slowly now that, in a way, he was probably more angry at how humans disregarded the lives of others, even their

own. It must have angered him more to know that demons were being used for such meaningless gains. Our own lives meant nothing to the Shogunate nor those who opposed him. In their eyes, we were only tools for their own ends. He must have been angry for the things I did not know and could not even remember, the tragic history of my own clan. His shock at my alliance with humans, even though the Shinsengumi had been so different, began to make more sense as Sen unfolded the history of the interactions between demons and humans to me.

"It must have been quite a shock to learn you were a demon," Sen finally said when she was done.

I smiled weakly at this. "It was," I admitted. It did not help that it had come from Kazama that I had first learned of this. When Kazama had told me that evening, years ago, I had wanted desperately to reject it. There was no way I was like the cold, demonic killer that I had thought he was. It was even less likely I, in any way, resembled his insane friends. How laughable, looking back, I had been at that time. Granted, it wasn't very funny at all, even if one subscribed to Okita's sense of humor.

"All my life, I had thought I was a human," I admitted quietly. My father had never given me doubt of that. After what Sen had told me, I realized that it was good to hear about such things from a friend and not demonic seeming enemies. Even though I had felt utterly alone, Sen had found me and helped me. Of those that I had met, she probably could understand what I said better than anyone. Unlike those before her, she would try even if she didn't. "When I was little and I would sometimes get hurt from playing too roughly. Father would always reassure me that what I had was a gift." He would always pet my head and gently clean away the blood from already healed cuts and scrapes. Those were the days when his mere presence had the ability to make me feel warm and safe... and loved.

"He told me it was a secret gift though, so I shouldn't tell it to anyone. Over time, I came to fear what others would think of me if they ever discovered my abilities. I never knew that he did it to keep me from being found out by the Shogun... by anyone, really." It had also prevented me from truly making friends with anyone. Always I had felt a need to keep them at arm's length so no hurt could be witnessed when accidents happened. In my mind, back then, I had always assumed that it would be my father and me forever. Living in this world, I had not thought I would have wanted another way of life.

Before the Shinsengumi, before Sen, I had never known anyone I could have called a friend. It did not sadden me then, when I had father. Now, knowing the difference and having lost the only man I had ever called family, I realized how naive I had been.

How ironic. The ones who had ordered the annihilation of my clan ended up being the side I was on in the human war I had involved myself in - against all that the demons have believed in. Even though I would never regret the time I spent with Hijikata and the Shinsengumi, I could not deny the bitterness such a thought left behind. That night, when Kazama had found me helping the Shinsengumi guard the Shogun himself, what thoughts must have ran inside of his head?

Looking back, I could see how my father must not have cared at all that the Shinsengumi, loyalists to the Shogunate, were his test subjects. Their pain must have made him happy, instead. How he must have hated them. Not just because they were humans, but because they were the shogun's own soldiers (or, at least, they had so desperately wanted to be). I did not doubt that anyone could have missed the determination concerning what Kondou and Hijikata wanted. To my father, the Shinsengumi must not have seemed very different from the ones who burned away the childhood I could not remember.

To have the Tokugawa issue the order for such an experiment. It must have destroyed whatever pity my father might have felt as a doctor. While I could not remember the past, there was no doubt Kodo and Kaoru were more than able to. While my father had probably bargained our safety with his cooperation, I had been completely ignorant of his sacrifices.

Sen quietly watched me as I absorbed what she had told me, rewriting the landscape of my own memories with the missing pieces I never knew existed. "I am always the last one to find out," I finally said, unable to hide my bitterness when everything finally clicked. "I am always too late to help and too weak to make a difference. In the end, I am always only a spectator of the horrible things in this world." My father's pain, Kaoru's pain, the pain suffered by the Shinsengumi as a result of the past...

In trying to protect me I was kept in the dark. In the end, my ignorance always caused me to betray someone. Unknowingly, I had surely hurt those I was close to the most.

Why only now do I learn of this? I could do nothing to ease the pain of even a sliver of that horrible history. Why? Only after everything seemed to be over with all the important players, dead, could I come to realize how little I understood. Why had I never managed to learn while they lived what they had gone through alone?

I had hurt too much to realize it then but Sen was suddenly there, holding me close when I had not even seen her move. "Chizuru-chan," she said softly, "It's okay to cry. You don't have to suffer this alone. I am here with you." I dug my forehead into her shoulder, my eyes dry and my breathing becoming painful gasps. But what else was there to say? What gave me the right to cry?

I shook in her embrace, unable and unwilling to shed my selfish tears, and I was guiltily glad that I wasn't alone.

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><p>To be continued...

6. Chapter 6

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

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><p>Chapter 6

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><p>Amagiri woke me with dinner the next evening. I had slowly come to notice how quietly dignified he was, though I had not appreciated this until now. One simply had to spend time in his presence to note by observation the graceful way he carried himself. After I stopped being afraid of him, I was starting to understand the respect I sometimes saw in Saito's eyes when the two of them fought.<p>

Sen had advised me to tell Amagiri all that had happened with Kaoru. I knew the practicality of what she had said, but I was still reluctant to do it. After all, it was one thing to tell a friend like Sen about what had happened and another thing entirely to tell Amagiri. While I admired him and he made me feel comfortable around him, he was still very much a stranger to me. I swallowed my discomfort and forced myself to tell him in as much detail as I could about what had occurred between Kaoru and myself.

Before I could start though, Amagiri cut me off and handed me my dinner. "After you eat, Yukimura-dono," he told me. He was very respectful to me, and I knew much of it had to do with the fact that I was the head of my clan. It was not that long ago that I had thought I was the last of my clan, but knowing Kaoru existed did not give me peace.

It was a very sad realization.

Still, I complied as gracefully as I could to Amagiri's request. In his own way, Amagiri was worried about me. When I was finished, I settled down in my futon and began to tell him what had happened, slightly more at ease with his presence though no less weary of the things I needed to say.

Even though I wanted to, I tried to leave nothing out. I knew, when Kaoru had come at me, that even though he was not as skilled as Amagiri and Kazama were, he was still a force to be reckoned with. He may not have been as skilled as most of the Shinsengumi captains either but he was far stronger and faster than they were and that made a difference. I was no match for him. If he were to continue where my father left off concerning the furies and I were to try to stop him, I would need help. It was also not the type of help that Sen could give to me but the type that only Amagiri and Kazama could offer.

In a way, I was glad. Kaoru was a demon which meant human help would only cause more harm than good. It was easier to trust that Amagiri and Kazama could aid me without truly endangering themselves the way anyone else would have to if they tried instead. I had already seen both demons' skills as warriors and, strangely, what once terrified me about them was the only things that I could truly rely on now to help me.

Amagiri listened quietly and respectfully. Every once in a while, I caught him looking surprised. That expression was reserved mostly for the parts that concerned Kaoru. Every time I talked about the furies though, disgust and disquiet would make Amagiri's expression become grim and thoughtful.

When I was finally done, it was quite dark out and the lamp's flame

wavered a bit from an unseen draft. Amagiri sat silently, a look of deep thought over his face. I said no more, letting him think over all that I had revealed.

"You will need to recover," he finally said with a nod. "It would be best for everyone if Kazama did not see you except in the best of health."

I blinked in surprise at his words. I had not thought it was possible but Amagiri gave me a wry grin. "I do not relish it, but we will have to tell him what has happened when he gets here. It would be a lot worse if you were bed-ridden." There was a hint of relief in his voice and I was so surprised that I found myself laughing at his words. I hadn't meant to, but I had not thought this would be Amagiri's first concern.

"I'm sorry," I finally said, wrestling with myself till I could look him in the eyes with only the slightest hint of a smile. "You really surprised me." I admitted.

Amagiri gave me the same wry smile. Then his face was serious again. "Concerning your brother, Yukimura-dono, I think we can agree that he is rather dangerous right now." I nodded. "Granted, while I have heard about the Nagumo family... I never thought they would turn to the Water of Life." This he said more to himself than me, sounding almost disappointed.

We were quiet for a long moment. "Princess Sen suspects she knows where your brother may be hiding." Amagiri told me. I looked to him in surprise. "The Princess had located your father earlier, before our confrontation. He was on land that the main Yukimura family owned." I gasped, my mouth unable to voice the thoughts racing through my head. "As it was the last known place Kodo-san was at before he came to attack Edo, we suspect the rest of his research rests there. If your brother is truly looking for Kodo-san's research, he would be heading there next."

I could only nod in agreement as I stared at him wide-eyed. The place I was born. I had not dreamed I would ever get to see such a place.

Amagiri hesitated as he looked at me. "Perhaps," he suggested, "you should stay here, Yukimura-dono." I realized then he must have remembered how I had cried when my father had died. This journey, at its worst, would mean I would lose the last person connected to me by blood. In fact, Kaoru was even more close to me than my father was, though I had no memories to associate with him except the ones I gained through our previous meetings.

"No," I shook my head without pause at his suggestion. I smiled, trying to alleviate the harshness I knew had been in such a sudden refusal. "I told Kazama then and I still believe it now, this is in a lot of ways, my responsibility. Even if I require your help, Amagiri-san, I still need to see this through to the end."

Amagiri studied me for a long moment and I thought I saw a flicker of respect in his eyes. "Kazama chose well," was all he said. My face heated up so fast I was almost dizzy with the force of my blush.

"U-um," I stumbled as he got up to leave. "G-good night, Amagiri-san."

Amagiri smiled at me with real humor in his eyes, nodding an acknowledgment my way before leaving. I felt from him that same kindness that my father used to show before he left for Kyoto. After he was gone, I sat in the room alone, thinking of the past for a time.

I remembered, as I looked around, all my childhood times spent in this house. I remembered my father, once more, not as the monster he seemed at the end, but as a doctor who had to see his clan destroyed, who had to do terrible things to keep me safe, and who must have lost not only to the madness of the Water of Life, but the madness of all the things he shielded me from about this world. In the end, looking back, I couldn't bring myself to hate him any more than I could that night when he died and I had not known any of these things.

"I forgive you, Father," I said softly to the empty room. "And... I'm sorry," I whispered as I put my head to my knees. At that moment I felt that I needed to apologize to the ghost of the past, for all the things I didn't even know until now.

After some time, I turned and blew out the lamp. We knew where Kaoru was likely to be and I needed to get better as soon as possible so that when Kazama showed up again we could track Kaoru down. I held the memory of Kazama close to me then, remembering how he had looked that night my father died, remembering the feel of his arms as he held me when I couldn't stop the tears from falling...

The memory of his strength lulled me to sleep.

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><p>To be continued...

7. Chapter 7

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

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><p>Chapter 7

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><p>For the first time in a long time I went out to greet the late morning sun. I was still a little dizzy but after I had some food, I felt better. Sen came and helped me pick something out from my old trunk, clothes I have not touched or worn in years. She wrinkled her nose at the dust and tried hard not to sneeze. I apologized to her for the state of the house, but she only waved it away and then proceeded to help me get dressed.<p>

I almost laughed at the expression she wore after we were done. While helping me get ready, Sen explained to me Kimigiku's absence. Apparently, since we had a good guess on where Kaoru was headed, Sen

decided it was best for Kimigiku to scout ahead and see what he was up to. While I was not well enough to travel and, apparently, no one wanted to risk Kazama's wrath by leaving him behind, information gathering was the best we could do.

I absorbed everything Sen told me while we got ready. She got my hair into something of a more elaborate bun than I would have done on my own, and I helped brush out hers, tying it up in the style she seemed to like. I never had a friend before and doing this made me feel better. I felt normal, almost like the human girls I used to only observe in the marketplace, sharing secrets and laughter with each other while I watched envious and afraid. I was really glad Sen was here now, and when we were done she suggested we go shopping in the afternoon.

From there, we moved on to lighter subjects that did not concern Kaoru, my father, or the furies. I didn't think it was possible, but Sen made my house livable again. Apparently, she had put Amagiri to work and we found him patching the roof on our way out after a quick lunch.

Even from the distance, we both saw his eyes widen at us. "Yukimura-dono?" there was definitely a question in his voice. We looked at each other and laughed at his reaction.

"That's me, Amagiri-san," I answered back cheerfully.

"Chizuru-chan and I are going to town to do some shopping," Sen told him. "Put your back into it and be ready with dinner when we return!" She ordered him good-naturedly.

Amagiri visibly sighed but assented and waved us farewell as we left. "I think he forgot you were a girl," Sen told me later as we walked arm in arm down the road.

"He's not the only one," I answered with a wry smile. I myself had forgotten what it was like to be in my old clothes again. I almost missed how much easier it was to move in my boy-clothes, but it was nice to be seen as a girl again.

"Do you think, Kazama-san would wear the same expression when he sees you in a kimono?" Sen asked, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

I looked at her, not quite sure how to respond. Obviously, laughing at the picture in my head at what Kazama might look like surprised was my first instinct and the idea was almost too delicious to let go of. But, with the utmost control, I suppressed it so that only a smile came. How wide that smile was, I had no control over. "He's always looking rather stiff, do you think his face can do it?" I asked teasingly back. Sen blinked at my response before she gave a hearty laugh. Now I really wanted to know how Kazama would respond to me in my traditional dress. He certainly hadn't seemed surprised when I put on western clothes and that was a huge change for even me. "However, I don't know if we can use Amagiri-san's reaction to judge how Kazama would react." Kazama was definitely far more arrogant and mysterious, annoyingly so usually.

Sen giggled, obviously she was having no problems imagining Kazama surprised and laughing at him for it. We went through the town, buying groceries mostly. Sen chattered and I enjoyed her topics. I

never really knew what it was like to have a friend like her until then and I was, for the first time in a long time, truly happy. Everything was a kind of a blur until something caught my eye. I stopped and turned to see a deep crimson silk sash in a fabric stall that had caught my attention. Sen paused with me and followed my gaze, curious as to what had stopped me in my tracks. A sly smile came over her lips though I didn't notice it until it was too late.

"Remind you of someone's eyes?" Sen asked, elbowing me lightly and breaking me out of my daze.

"Wh-what... no!" I said a little too quickly and defensively.

Sen giggled before giving me a genuine smile. "Isn't this better?" she asked instead. "Being able to shop for someone you like?"

I blushed but Sen already guessed that Kazama and my relationship had changed since that night I chose to go with him to Edo. While I had not yet told anyone about the kiss, I had a sinking feeling that Sen would probably dig it out of me before we left to chase after Kaoru. "It seems like a nice gift," I said shyly. "He's helped me a lot."

Sen nudged me again, her smile giving me confidence in my choice. "I think you should buy it!" We smiled at each other and I finally nodded. By the time we got back, we were laughing and talking again, as if we had always known each other and this was something we did often.

Surely, I had never known this until now...

The smell of food wafted to our noses when we stepped through the gate. "Amagiri-san sure is multi-talented," I commented. It had been such a long time since I had really thought of it as a home. Since my father's death, it seemed like such a cold, empty and forbidding place to me. Now when I think of it, I think of Sen's laughter and Amagiri's quiet but respectful presence, protecting us from whatever dangers there might be.

Sen grinned. "He's also a big push-over," she pointed out with a mischievous smile. Despite her words I could see that Sen really liked him. It was, actually, hard not to like Amagiri. Just a little while ago this thought would have been completely foreign to me, but now I realized that this was also how I had felt about the Shinsengumi before I got to know them.

Over dinner, I even got to see the serious Amagiri laugh. Sen just had that energy about her. It was really vibrant and contagious. Even though I had seen first-hand her serious and confident side, I really liked this side of her more. I felt she probably didn't get to show it as often as she would have wished. As time went on, I could understand Kimigiku's devotion to her lady, and that Sen's people must really love her a lot.

This type of peaceful living lasted a few more weeks. Like I had predicted, Sen was able to dig the fact that Kazama kissed me out of my reluctant mouth. There had been a momentary shout of disbelief from her that I had to muffle with my hands, for fear it would bring Amagiri running to her aid. Afterwards, every once in a while I would

catch her looking at me with something of a smugness that made me squirm. I had no doubt she would use it to Kazama's detriment.

Still, I had wished that it would never end.

I had forgotten what it was like to not be in the midst of war and worry. Even though I did miss Kazama, Sen's presence made everything bright and bearable, even happy. Yet, it was still a selfish wish. I had duties too. Sen was not the only one who was the leader of her clan, for I also held that responsibility. Despite the fact that we should have been glad that Kimigiku arrived safe and unharmed, with her our small, momentary peace was shattered again.

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><p>To be continued...

8. Chapter 8

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

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><p>Chapter 8

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><p>I remembered how white Kimigiku's face was as she recounted what she had seen. While the other was also a demon, it was obvious from her face that even a long-time demon could be moved by the horror of what the furies could do. Amagiri's own face became more and more unreadable as Kimigiku's report wore on. Sen's complexion soon became the same shade as Kimigiku's, but her lips were set in a firm, grim line and she bore the facts with dignity. I do not know how I looked, but I also did not turn away or deny any of it.<p>

How could I?

This was the fruit of my own clan's work. This was the darkness I was responsible for. I wanted to close my eyes and go back to the days when Father was still sane and I hadn't set foot outside of Edo, but those days were over. I remembered, instead, Kazama's piercing gaze as he told me that it was my choice to face the truth or ignore it. My spine straightened at the memory of his voice and I listened closely to all that Kimigiku had to say no matter how horrible it was. I listened until silence followed her words and my muscles ached at how tightly I held myself.

Everyone was silent. "So," Amagiri said wearily after a long pause. "Nagumo-san has made his move. He has poisoned the humans and continued where Kodo-san left off."

Sen clutched her fists. "When will Kazama-san get here?" she demanded. "We cannot just sit here while Nagumo-san threatens the humans. With his actions, he could reveal to all that demons still exist, even to the ones who do not believe in us anymore! Everything

we have done up to now would be wasted. The Imperial Army will also not overlook this for long and soon they may try to use us again or, at the very least, begin to try to track us down."

Amagiri looked grim and slowly, all eyes turned to me. "Let us wait three more days," I said softly. "We will prepare for departure during it. If Kazama does not show up by then, we will have no choice but to leave him a note. Every minute we wait, we are allowing more furies to be born and more horrors to be visited upon the humans."

It was strange... when have I start saying such things as "the humans", as if I were not the same as them? While this was true, it was only recently that I had begun to think like that, much less talk like that.

"Rushing into battle without a plan is a bad idea," Amagiri advised. "While what you say is true, if we do not have a solid idea on how to stop your brother you are only going to make things worse."

I bit my lip. Every part of me wanted to deny what Amagiri was telling me. A small part of me even wanted to deny that Kaoru and I were related by blood. How could someone who shared what ran in my veins be such a monster?

I swallowed those words. I thought, instead, about what Kimigiku had told us. I thought about what Amagiri was advising. I also knew that if I waited longer than the three days I offered, I would go mad.

"He is building an army," I finally answered, considering my thoughts and my words equally carefully. "If he is planning and continuing what my Father... what Kodo-san started, he would be looking to recruit others into becoming furies. If that is what he is doing, he will need to feed them blood." There was no denying it. Sunlight hurt the furies and blood-lust filled them with madness. Neither could be excluded.

"Do you think that Nagumo-san is working for the Imperial Army as well?" Sen asked, her eyes hooded and thoughtful.

I shook my head. "No. He mocked their inability to stop the furies the last time we met. I doubt he sees them in any high esteem. Sen, you have even told me that he was sent to the Nagumo because he would not submit. If anything, he is only looking to use the furies." While I had not known Kaoru long, somehow I felt what I said was correct.

Amagiri relaxed a little. If Kaoru had been working with the Imperial Army, things could very easily get a lot uglier. Still, not having the Imperial Army in the equation meant that we were clueless to what Kaoru meant to do. Also, just because Kaoru was not directly involved with them, it did not mean the Imperial Army will not be soon involved simply because they would be drawn by the carnage Kaoru left behind.

"While I would prefer not to rule it out," Amagiri said. "Assuming Nagumo-san does not mean to work for the humans, his actions are still too obvious. It would not be long before the Imperial Army will try to use this to their advantage. Knowing someone is still

continuing the research concerning the furies would push them to seek whoever is doing it, out. You are correct, Princess, if they cannot find this person, they will come looking for us again."

We all nodded in agreement to this. Kimigiku was grim as well. She had, mostly, covered the tracks that Kaoru left behind, burning the remains of villages ravaged by furies. However, now that she was here, no one would be covering Kaoru's tracks.

"He's leaving me a message," I finally said. "It will continue until I reply in return."

Sen frowned at this, but no one could deny what everyone had already suspected. "Do you think you can stall him?" Sen finally asked me, her eyes searching my own.

This was no longer Sen, my friend. This was Sen, the head of her clan. I looked back and thought about my last encounter with Kaoru. I stayed very still and forced myself not to grimace or reach for my stomach. "I don't know," I finally said. "But if the message is for me, then he would come for me once we are out there. He seems to enjoy gloating." I finally said, weary and tired. More tired than I had felt in the last few days when laughter had lifted me away so easily from the worries that weighed me down now. "If I don't go out soon, we may very well find the Imperial Army adding complications to our investigation."

Even Amagiri could not deny that. If the Imperial Army was not already aware of such acts, it would be very soon. While some of it could be attributed to ronins running wild since the war's recent end, it would not last long before someone began to look into it.

He sighed as Sen turned to him, as if he knew what was coming. "We'll move out in three days," Sen said in a tone that broached no argument. "We will start the preparations tomorrow. Amagiri-san, please write a note to Kazama detailing what has happened and our decision. We'll start heading north. Wherever he is, Nagumo-san is surely heading for where Kodo-san was last known to be. If he is going to track us down, might as well make it easier for him. Perhaps, we can kill two birds with one stone."

Amagiri looked at her for a long moment but did not argue, much to my relief. In the end, he only gave her a nod that was almost a bow.

The night would be a long one, it seemed.

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><p>To be continued...

9. Chapter 9

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

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><p>Chapter 9

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><p>Something had been bothering me. I did not know how to put it to words. The further north we went and the closer we got to the home I could not remember, the more dreadful I felt.<p>

In the day I was usually so weary from the long treks through the woods that I just wanted to sit and sleep. It was as if I could never sleep enough before dawn was upon us again. The days grew shorter as winter got closer and we reached further north, heading ever deeper into the woods. We did not want to be seen by anyone, and I guess everyone else was more used to using their demon stamina than I was. At night, the chill of the fall seeped into my clothes and I found myself, many times, staring up at the sky and shivering myself to sleep.

What kind of sky must Hijikata have seen in his last moments? I wondered this often as my breath misted the space between me and the heavens. Other times I would remember standing in front of my room on cold nights similar to the ones now, watching it with Saito's quiet presence next to me. Once I even remembered Okita teasing laughter as he made fun of me for talking to myself again. I missed them so much in those moments before I slept, thinking of the past so I would forget that I was surrounded by the cold and the darkness. Unlike before, my walls were now made up of air and trees instead of stone walls, wooden beams, and paper. The place I was at I had no name for, unlike Kyoto or Edo. When had I began to think of Kyoto as home? When had I began to call Edo my home again?

These types of questions came and went through me, the cold making me sad and nostalgic.

There were not many people around, and we stopped running into massacred villages that needed to be burned. At least that was what I thought, until over a week into our trip. It was dark out, not surprisingly, when we were attacked.

Amagiri woke first even though it was Kimigiku who was on watch. She hadn't needed to wake him for him to realize what was happening and he was the one to alert her of the approaching dangers. She had felt it too, but by then he was already beside her. She woke us in the all too quiet darkness, her hands on our shoulders, gentle but firm. I saw the two of them exchange a look and an agreement seemed to have passed between them then.

Kimigiku silently pointed us in the direction opposite of where Amagiri was standing. Apparently, we had not been surrounded. No one argued. I grabbed Sen's hand in my own and the two of us ran in the direction we were pointed to. Both of us had gone to the river earlier. At the time it was only to gather wood for the fire and water for our provisions, now it was to get away from the heat of where the battle would be fought. Even though it was dark, our demon eyes could still perceive the woods around us quite clearly. It was a trick that Sen had taught me just before we left.

I could still remember how reluctant she had looked when I convinced her that I needed to put on my boy clothes again. While it was more comfortable and more suitable for our trip, Sen had seemed rather

disappointed with the overall look. "I was hoping Kazama-sama would see you in your kimono," she admitted the evening we left, as we sat around the campfire. "It would have been nice to see his face make an expression other than his normal one."

In fact, that was Sen's polite name concerning the arrogant expression Kazama usually wore around people.

I didn't see it as often anymore, not as I used to. He liked to wear his quiet, gentle look around me more. Sometimes it would become thoughtful and other times playful and teasing. While he was rather handsome when he smiled, I was usually more preoccupied with being affronted at how much enjoyment he got out of making fun of me. This usually caused him to smirk at me all the more, knowing how much more insulted I was the longer he continued.

Even Amagiri and Kimigiku shared a knowing smile at Sen's words and I had hoped the heat of the fire would hide my blush. Even then, in the dark forest and searching for furies, Sen could make us all smile.

When we finally reached the river, we looked back, hearing the clashing of swords. "Should we continue?" Sen asked worriedly. I wasn't sure if that was a good idea or not, but before I could decide, we were interrupted.

"Ara," an elegant voice cut through the darkness and froze us in place. "Two little girls lost in the woods. Where are your protectors? Would not the wolves gobble you up if they knew?"

I turned and my wakizashi was out before he was even finished, but Kaoru stepped into the moonlight lazily, not at all threatened by my stance. We both knew who was better with a sword and with an eerie smile on his illuminated face, he stopped some distance away. "Hello, little sister," he said at last before his eyes swept over to Sen. "I see you brought a friend, this time."

I gritted my teeth. "Sen and the others have nothing to do with this."

Kaoru laughed. "I beg to differ. I think they are quite willing to involve themselves in our affairs. Why else would they have come here with you, little sister?"

I had no answer. He was right. I had dragged them along. In the distance I could hear the screams of metal against metal. Why did it come to this?

"Why am I doing this to you?" Kaoru asked with an unhappy look on his face. "Surely that is what you are wondering." His smile became cruel then, and for the first time I felt as if I was seeing his heart. "Isn't it obvious? It's because I hate you, little sister." His voice was still calm and elegant and something about us made even Sen stay quiet beside me.

"Why do you hate me?" I asked as calmly as possible, even though fear made my heart flutter.

All I saw then was the white of his hair, gleaming in the moonlight. I had no chance to react and then suddenly, Kaoru was beside me and

Sen was at his feet. I did not smell blood but I panicked. I jumped in front of her, ready to shove Kaoru away but he was no longer there and I found myself standing between Sen and him.

He was smiling again, his hair black and gleaming, his eyes hollow like the sockets of a skull but no longer gold like a demons. "I wasn't a daughter," he said. His words made me gape at him, and I didn't dare ask him what he did to Sen or even why he was saying what he was saying. "The Nagumo were so disappointed. They had thought they would get the daughter, after all. No matter what they did to me," he seemed to grimace at the memory, "I would not turn into a girl." His smile then was haunted and mad. There was so much fury in him I doubted that he had ever needed the Water of Life. "But don't worry. Those people are long gone," he said. It was more a reassurance to himself than to me.

"But you, little sister," he turned the full force of his anger onto me. "You were so loved. So happy. You didn't have a care in the world. What more could you possibly ask for? Don't you think that our meeting is destined... so you could know how the other side lived?"

I wanted to reply, but I found suddenly the world seemed to spin around me instead. I fell to my knees and heard him laugh. "I guess this was a good time to check on you after all." He was standing over me again. I remembered how it had felt with a hole in my stomach, unable to stop him from taking my father's notes. Yet, even then I had been able to feel him loom over me. Right now, it was as if he had appeared in front of me again... or had I simply lost track of consciousness for a moment?

My forehead felt hot, my skin felt clammy. I wanted to vomit and my throat felt parched and dry. My arms shook to keep me upright. I tried to swallow the bile and the feeling, glaring up at him as I tried to regain control over my own body.

Yet, Kaoru only stared down at me without a threatening move, even at my weakest moment. Finally, as if waking, he blinked and then began to laugh. I couldn't understand why, but then I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the river beside me. I paled. Horns adorned my forehead and my hair was ghostly white. My eyes, usually a honeyed-brown, were a silvery-gold in the moonlight. I blinked and the reflection did not change.

I gasped and straightened, pushing myself away from the images as I swayed to my feet. Tentatively, I touched my horns and they were two solid points upon my hot forehead. Was this my demon form? I had moved too fast and I felt dizzy from it, but the momentum allowed me to stand again.

"Oh good," Kaoru said, further away than I remembered. "Now you realized that you have become a fury." His might as well have stabbed me again, twisting his katana inside of me over and over. His words hurt me worse than any physical wound he had ever inflicted upon me. "Did I forget to tell you that I drank the Water of Life? That day when I stabbed you, I had cut myself so that my blood would mingle with yours. I'm glad it was strong enough to turn you... But I guess you thought it was the wound that caused you so much pain." He said it so casually, as if he had not done the worst thing in the world to me. As if he was telling me the night was getting colder than usual,

not that all my dreams were dead.

If he had killed me, it would have been kinder.

I tore my gaze from my reflection and looked at him then, horrified. I had been getting more tired in the day, but I had never felt the need for blood. So far, I had written it off as recovering from the injury he had given me earlier and to the long treks we were making daily. I had been making a lot of excuses for it, because I had not known this was even an option. I wanted to ask him why he would do this to me and I wanted to know how my suffering meant anything. But he must have seen all of it on my face.

"Can't live in your safe little world anymore, can you, little sister?" He tried to smirk but it only came out as a snarl. Without further prompting he had turned to leave. "I'll check on you again, soon. This time your expression was almost perfect."

And then he was gone.

By the time Sen woke up I had rested her head on my lap as I waited for Kimigiku and Amagiri to find us. I had no strength left after Kaoru's cruel revelations. While I had not drunk the Water of Life, it did not seem to matter. I had my own blood mixed with Kaoru's and that seemed to have been enough. What did this mean for me? Does this make me a monster as well?

I had come to accept the fact that I was a demon. After Kazama's kiss and Sen's friendship, I had never been gladder of it. But what was I now?

Sen's eyes finally opened a short while after the sounds of battle were quieted. Because no furies came for us, I assumed Amagiri and Kimigiku had won. She looked at me in concern, wincing when she shifted, so I smoothed her hair but forced her to remain lying down when she tried to get up. Rising too quickly would only hurt her. Even though she was a demon, I had seen that Kaoru had not held back when he hit her to knock her out. There was a lump on the base of her skull that was rapidly reducing, but it was not completely healed yet.

For once I was glad she had not been awake to discover my secret.

"What happened, Chizuru-chan?" Sen asked confused and a little scared, her eyes searching my own.

I smiled down at her as reassuringly as I could manage and held her hand. Her body relaxed so I guess I was somewhat successful in hiding my turmoil. "It's okay now," I told her instead. "Kaoru is gone." I couldn't bring myself to tell her what he had shown me, what he had done to me. I couldn't tell the person who knew about Kazama's kiss that I was now tainted.

It hurt me too much to even think about it for any period of time.

I fought to hold it in. Yet, with Sen looking at me with her clear, understanding eyes, I felt the tears slip through my control. She rose slowly then, pushing away my now limp hand that had stayed her before. Hesitating for only a moment, she reached out and held me to

her like she had before when I had woken to realize all the things I had never known.

"It's okay, Chizuru-chan," Sen murmured to me. "It's going to be okay."

Over and over again she assured me with her soothing voice. I clutched at her sleeve and cried into her shoulder, unlike before. I listened to her knowing it to be a lie no matter how many times she repeated it or how gently and kindly she meant them.

Nothing would ever be alright again. Those words choked me but I still could not bring myself to tell her.

This time, like the past, there was nothing I could do to change it.

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><p>To be continued...

10. Chapter 10

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

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><p>Chapter 10

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><p>It did not help that the next day was when Kazama caught up with us. I had, up to that day, imagined a million ways concerning how he would have looked and what he would have said when we reunited. I tried to also imagine my own reaction to him, and until then, it had always ended with both of us smiling, no matter how embarrassing my imagination got.<p>

But after what Kaoru had revealed to me by the river, I doubt I could ever smile again.

He simply appeared in the late morning, while Sen and I were helping Amagiri and Kimigiku dispose of the dead fury's bodies. No one was in a good mood, though both Amagiri and Kimigiku worked tireless to clear the bodies. Sen and I had slept, though not very much and not very well the night before. I had exhausted myself with tears and our guardians found the two of us leaning against each other by the river with our eyes closed.

They had kindly left us in peace until the sun broke over the river. Then, Kimigiku had come over again and gently shook us awake.

Sen's head wound had disappeared completely by then, though I was sure she was still a little tender in that general area where Kaoru had struck her. We helped with what we could, making a large fire and clearing the camp. We brought water for Amagiri and Kimigiku, and gathered more wood to make the fire hotter and fiercer whenever it

began to die down a little.

There were a lot of bodies to burn. We didn't want to risk anyone uncovering any graves either. I would have been impressed that neither of them seemed harmed, though Kimigiku claimed that Amagiri did most of the work. After all, her forte had always been spying and information gathering, not fighting furies. Confrontations were just not a skill she excelled in.

In a way, that made what Amagiri did even more impressive, but I had already known about that when he had single-handedly dealt with my father's fury army in the past.

It must have been difficult, but he didn't even show strain as he heaved body after body into neat piles to be thrown to the flames. Soon the smell of charred flesh wafted over the clearing, even though we all stood upwind of it. Still, I had enough of the smell to never want to eat meat again.

That was the state Kazama found us in when he stepped out of the woods. He must have had to take the long way, circling to reach us in order for him to avoid the smell of burning flesh as well. The four of us were standing gravely and silently upwind of the large bonfire, every once in a while, one of us would move to throw in a body or some large pieces of wood. I don't know what he saw on my soot covered face but his eyes landed on me first. The expression on his face gradually relaxed though, as if he had held himself tight with concern for my safety until he saw that I was alright in the flesh.

In a way, I had been his responsibility since he had found me trying to get to Yodo Castle to meet up with the Shinsengumi. While his feelings had grown for me, in a way the responsibility he must have felt towards me must have remained unchanging between us. Even now he was looking out for me.

I had not realized what he had meant when he had told me about my lineage all those years ago. At the time I had only been an excuse for him to use to pursue the Shinsengumi, but in his own way he was warning me of the things I did not know. He was showing me my ignorance in the small moments whenever we found each other.

Yet, at that time, all I had been able to focus on was his ruthlessness and his arrogance.

Now, looking at him, I felt both pain and pleasure. I felt the slow rising panic inside me loosening its grip because I had come to instinctively rely on his strength. Seeing him there, looking into his eyes, there was no doubt of the power he exuded. The arrogance that had made me dislike him from the start soothed me now. The sureness he always had about him, concerning what was right and what was wrong, concerning who he was and his place in the world, it had become a rock I could lean on when I was most uncertain about myself and my own decisions.

But the pain was there too.

The pain came from knowing that despite what he had promised me that cool Spring day in Ezo, it was a promise I could not force him to keep. I had always known what he had wanted from the start. No, it

was not just what he wanted but what his duty as the head of the Kazama clan demanded of him. As one of the last two Yukimuras, that duty meant a lot to me too. I knew that in me, before Kaoru and Edo and the furies, I had represented all that he had desired and, in some ways, I had surprised him by offering him things that he had not expected.

We had been perfect for each other that day, underneath the sky when he had held my gaze and gave me a future I could never have dreamed of possible. In his eyes everything that I had lost could, in its own way, be found again. The thing I most wanted from him was a family, and he could so easily have given that to me. I had lost it time and again, already, once with my father and again with the Shinsengumi. Yet, with Kazama I could regain it all and know that he was strong enough not to be lost to me. This time, there was no doubt I could keep him. Life would not so easily take from me again someone I could come to love, someone I was already beginning to care for.

Yet, in that moment, I had forgotten about how weak I had always been.

It was always me who was not strong enough.

When my father left, I could not protect him and it was him who was trying to protect me. With the Shinsengumi, it was I who had lost my way and who always failed to reach them in time. I was the one who was not in Aizu when Saito was shot down. I was the one who failed to get to Ezo in time to stay by Hijikata's side as he watched his friends and the Shinsengumi fall apart, one-by-one. I was not there when Kondou was executed for following his dreams, nor was I able to help Okita as the tuberculosis rendered him useless and signed his death warrant while his friends fought without him.

I couldn't even stop Sanan from his research or even prevent Heisuke from becoming one himself. Some days I still remembered how Heisuke looked with his eyes so haunted by still being alive.

Now, it was I who was not strong enough to stop Kaoru. Not only was I not able to prevent him from creating more furies, but I had not been strong enough to prevent him from corrupting me. Now, I was the one responsible for crushing Kazama's dream - not just my own.

I wanted to cry again, but there had already been enough tears shed for things that were already out of my grasp. Even though I could not find happiness now, I could still make a difference. Even before Kazama had shown himself before us, I had made my decision concerning Kaoru.

Still, my voice was breathless when I said his name. Still my heart skipped a beat when he gave me that lazy smile of his that used to lack the gentleness I saw now. I had never known he was capable of it until Ezo, but all too soon we had to part ways.

Now, I tried to burn this memory into me, so that even without him I could hold on to this small cherished thing that I could never call my own.

"Chizuru," he replied, much to the amazement of everyone there except Sen, who was also a little surprised despite what she knew about our kiss. It was true. Even I had not told anyone that we were on a first

name basis. "You survived."

I felt my mouth twitch, but even I knew as I watched his eyes darken at my expression that there was no humor in my response. I could not hide how I felt from Kazama. It was hard enough to look him in the eyes and not cry.

"Yes," I said, unable to keep the brittleness out of my voice. This time, I was sure that it was I who caused the surprise on the faces of those around us. "I survived."

We were no longer strangers since Ezo, but after last night I could never be more than one. I would never again be able to touch his warm skin or feel his lips on mine. I could not hide the truth from him because he deserved so much more. He deserved more than the hatred and the darkness that colored my world, more than the demons that haunted my family and the sins that stained our hands... my hands.

He deserved more than me.

Yet, even still, at that moment, I could not utter a single word to shatter the future that had kept me strong in his absence. All I wanted was to feel his hands on my shoulders again, keeping me upright and making me feel safe. All I wanted was just one more chance.

But all that I had ever wished for had always been just a little too much.

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><p>To be continued...

11. Chapter 11

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

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><p>Chapter 11

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><p>I could not tell them.<p>

Days went on while Sen and Kazama watch me fall into a spiraling depression. Some days I would drag myself after the others with a smile plastered on my face until my skin hurt from the effort. Those days were the good ones, when I could muster the strength to pretend everything was alright even if no one was fooled. Other days I would feel as if my limbs were made of lead and I would slow everyone down with my dragging pace. On those days I would find myself blaming the poison coursing through my veins, but I suspected that the reality of losing Kazama when he was right there, in front of me, didn't help.

We were getting closer to my home. I knew this. Not just from the maps Amagiri and Kazama would look over by the camp fire, but from something deep inside of me. The trees began to look familiar, the air began to stir my memories... And the flowers, when they waved in fields that we would happen upon in the woods, would make me pause and my heart would ache. I still remembered nothing and my depression preoccupied me enough that I didn't care.

Sometimes, while walking I would think back on those days when Sen would put her head close to me and wonder out-loud how Kazama would react to seeing me in my kimono. I would laugh quietly to myself at those memories, but the bitterness always tinged it and I guessed to Sen and Kazama who were both keeping an eye on me, I must have looked like I was going mad.

I was surprised they lasted as long as they did. On the tenth day Kazama simply grabbed my arm after we stopped to set up camp and pulled me aside. He didn't even bother to make up an excuse, just shot Amagiri a look that probably was along the lines of "Don't you even think about bothering us or die," and then left it at that.

Not surprisingly, no one came after us.

"What has happened to you?" Kazama demanded, his voice sounding on edge as soon as he was certain no one could over hear us. I guess, in a way, I had pushed him too far. I knew that he had, at first, planned to wait me out. If this had been a normal issue I might have gone to him after I had gathered my thoughts on what to say. Unfortunately, for the both of us, this was not a normal issue and his patience had obviously run dry concerning my taciturn behavior.

We hadn't really talked for a while. I hadn't allowed it to happen. Kazama had, gruffly, and a bit clumsily, tried to draw me out around the third day, when he realized how badly I was behaving, but I never gave him an opening after that. Whenever possible I would use Sen or Kimigiku or both as shields. Sen was amazed at my behavior at first, but Kimigiku submitted to it as best as she could. I was thankful to them for their courage. After all, Kazama was definitely not someone to try to be a shield against, even if one was a demon.

Sen, in my own way, I had also avoided being alone with. I used her as a shield, but I would never answer any of her questions about what had happened with Kaoru. Her concern was growing and she was looking more and more tired and stressed, probably over my sudden cold and distant nature. Yet, even though I felt guilty, I just couldn't say it.

Now, facing Kazama, I could feel the hysteria of losing him rising inside of my chest until all reason was blotted out. Fear swamped me and I think some of it must have shown on my face. He frowned at me, and I think, whatever reactions he had been expecting, this was probably not it.

I must have hurt him. I could see it on his face, in the silence between us that I had only began to realize the depth of. Even though I had not known him as long as any of the men in the Shinsengumi, after I had gotten over my initial fears, I realized Kazama was not as hard to read as I had previously thought. Then again, Hijikata and Saito were both hard to decipher on their best days and they were far

less straight-forward than Kazama was at his worst.

"I'm sorry," I finally said. I clutched my arms around my middle and looked away. If I had told him the truth, it would hurt him so much more, I told myself. More importantly, it would break me apart. "I- I didn't mean to avoid you." That wasn't the truth, but it wasn't really a lie either. Of all the people I wanted to avoid the least, Kazama was at the top of the list.

I could hear him snarl, but Kazama stopped being able to truly cow me for a long time now. The fear I felt was from something else entirely. Just the very thought of losing him could make my throat constrict and hurt me as if my insides were break apart. When I looked at him now, that was all I could think about. When walking in the woods, I often would study his back and imagined myself telling him the truth.

I didn't want to think about what his face would look like when it happened but looking at his back didn't help. I would be reminded in those moments that his back would probably be the last thing I would see when the truth came out...

Now the two of us stood facing each other and not saying a word. I couldn't even look at him. Kazama regained control of himself and his voice smoothed to that familiar quality that used to sooth me instead of depress me. "Do you think I am not strong enough to handle whatever it is you are keeping to yourself?" Even though he sounded normal, his words were cold.

I opened my mouth to deny it and then closed it forcefully. Finally, I raised my face to his. In that moment, I wanted to reach out more than ever. I wanted him to hold me tightly and make me feel like it was really going to be okay, the way Sen promised me that night by the river when my world went to hell.

Instead, I took a step back. "It was never a question of your strength, Kazama-sama." He blinked at me calling him by his family name again, more formally than I have for a very long time now. He must have realized that I was trying to create as much of a physical barrier as an emotional one between us. I wanted to excuse it as a way to protect him from what was to come, but I wasn't deluded enough to ignore the fact that it was also a way for me to protect myself. "I was always the weaker one," I admitted quietly, resolving myself for what I was about to do. I had waited long enough! Yet still my hand quivered as I pulled the ties that held my hair back and away from my face.

I had lost all my courage then for the necessary words. I could not even look at him as my hair fell around my face. But by then, I was also tired of hurting him just to keep myself safe. I had been avoiding my duties, and the Shinsengumi had taught me to be better than that. Holding those memories to me I finally looked up. My white hair fluttered in the wind, my horns left like a hot burning brand on my forehead, and surely, my eyes were gold once more.

I looked him in the eyes then and dared him to question me.

In that silence I finally found my voice again and when I spoke, I tried not to sound as small, shameful and full of pain as I felt. Every question he asked, no matter how difficult the truth was I

answered to the best of my abilities. I struggled to keep my voice steady and that made my answers curt. Kazama didn't seem bothered by that, but understanding lit up his eyes and his mouth became thinner and thinner. In the end, he was more concerned with what I had to say than how I said it.

"Why did you not tell me this as soon as I joined you?" he wanted to know when all other things have been cleared up and answered.

How do I say this without exposing myself to more emotional injury? I looked at him, wanting him to understand. The silence stretched and in that silence, under his gaze, I forced myself to accept the one thing I still had not admitted to even myself. I have come to love him. It was a feeling that was new and untended, but it was there. In him I had seen a future I could finally be happy with. It was a future that I had wanted to pursue and come to look forward to. Just the promise of it was what had allowed me to deal with the Shinsengumi's passing. It had even given me the strength to pursue the furies, to do what I thought was right and necessary. Kazama deserved no less than the truth, no matter how much it hurt me or how vulnerable it left me.

I had never confessed my feelings to anyone before, but more than the horns that burned on my head, more than my heart thudding wildly against my chest, I knew I had to do this. Surely, surely my chest was hotter now than my forehead could ever be.

"I wanted you to accept me, Chikage," I finally said softly, tearing down the very walls I built but moments ago. For the first time since we met up I used his name. I said it as softly and as lovingly as the feelings inside of me felt. "When you told me you would come for me when we were at Ezo, I saw my future in your eyes. Even after what Kaoru did to me... I didn't want to let that go. Not when I... when I have started to have feelings for you." Kazama looked at my face, I knew he was aware how vulnerable I was allowing myself to be. I knew he would give me nothing less than the truth and I didn't want to hear it.

Not now, not ever.

Before he could break my heart, I did it myself. Because, after all that he had done for me, a red silk sash would never be enough to repay him. This had never been his responsibility and I was the fool who dragged it on.

"I am releasing you from that promise, Chikage." I looked at him in the darkness with my eyes surely as wild as the feeling inside of me. My blood pounded in my ears so hard I doubted that I would have heard him respond even with my enhanced hearing. I should have been able to clearly see him, as if it were the light of day, but somehow, the lines of his form blurred and his colors melted together. "I am a fury now. I can't give you any pure-blooded demon children. I can't take you up on your offer to stay by your side. P-please," my voice finally wavered and my courage fled me as my heart clenched at my own words. "Find someone else to be happy with..."

My eyes were now too clouded with tears to see anything with clarity. My hands went to my chest, but there was nothing I could really hold on to. What could I offer it? There was nothing to keep it together now when we both knew the facts could not be changed in what I had

revealed.

Kazama stood there for a long moment watching me. I was so tired and so wrecked with pain that I could only hang my head and cry. I didn't want him to see me like this, but I had used up all my strength to say the things that needed to be said. I wanted to know what he was thinking and I feared to know those same things. I still wanted to be held, to be reassured, to be loved... but I did not have the breath or the will to ask for them.

Then, quietly, without another word, Kazama finally turned and left me there in the dark with my white hair and my broken dreams. I heard him go, but even then, I hadn't even the courage to look up and watch his blurry back disappear from sight...

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><p>To be continued...

12. Chapter 12

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

* * *

><p>Chapter 12

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><p>The first thing I felt was the breeze, soft and warm on my cheeks. Someone is calling my name. There is laughter in that voice and so much happiness I could feel it seep into me, filling me with joy. My face is smiling. Smiling.<p>

I am so happy.

There is a field spread out before me, covered in tiny, beautiful flowers. My hands want to reach out and gather them up into my arms. I wanted to make a bouquet and then as many wreathes as possible. I think, maybe four? I wanted to make something beautiful and put it on my head... on the heads of the ones I love.

I live in a small house, hidden away from the rest of the world. It is warm and safe. I am loved and cared for. All the faces around me are smiling. Life is happy and peaceful. Every day is full of laughter and games, friends and loved ones. I... remember? I remember these days fondly...

I am looking into familiar eyes... laughing, caring eyes that are the same as my own. Then a feeling comes over me. The sky overhead suddenly turns red.

Someone is calling my name again. Someone important, I know this. This time, the voice is not filled with love and joy but fear. It is so foreign in that familiar voice that I felt the wrongness of it to my very bones.

A horrible scream pierces the air and rings in my ears. There's a person in front of me... Who are they? Should I know them?

Someone I love leaps between us, their arms held wide. This is someone I love, I know this person's back. But I can't remember who it belongs to.

Everything smells like blood. I'm covered in something. It's red and slick and my cheeks are wet...

I...

Now, someone is holding me tight. It was so tight every breath is a little bit of agony. I can hear them panting and I can feel their heart racing beneath my ear. We're running away from my house.

I don't want to go. I'm terrified, but I don't want to go! Somehow I know we are leaving behind something terribly important.

Somewhere inside of me, a tiny, despairing voice says that those quiet, happy, peaceful days will never come again. What it says hurts so much. It hurts so much more than the steel arms around me, more than the smell of blood that I can't escape. I am crying now, as my home grows farther and farther away.

"Damn them..." The person carrying me is talking. His voice is familiar but his tone is not. He sounds angry, but... is he crying too? "All we ever wanted was to live in peace... But I guess the humans couldn't even let us have that."

There is so much bitterness. So much blood. I wanted the sunlit fields and the tiny flowers. I wanted smiles and laughter and to feel warm and safe again.

I know that what I want will never be possible.

My sobbing mingles with the voice of the person carrying me, two sides of the same miserable coin. Someone who understands me. Someone who knows what we have lost this day...

"Bastards... I hate them! I hate them..." he chants. The angry thumping heart next to my ear grows louder and louder. I can feel hatred wrap its searing tendrils around my heart in response to his own. I clutch at the material of his shirt, his feelings vibrating so clearly through me that I felt like we were the same person sharing the same, overwhelming hatred...

"I hate them..." I echo so fiercely that the feeling wakes me up.

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><p>To be continued...

13. Chapter 13

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

* * *

><p>Chapter 13

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><p>"I hate them..." I woke to the light of the sun and the white of the fall sky. A single leaf drifted and fell, brushing my wet cheek and then tumbling to the ground beneath me. I had thought I would not be able to sleep, but I had slept and I had dreamed.<p>

But it was not just a dream.

The emotion inside of me now was pure and black. Even with the fresh, pain-shaking heartache the night before, I could barely remember where I was or who I was or why I had been sad. In the wake of that dream, I had almost completely forgotten about Kazama and my unrequited feelings for him. My present loss paled in comparison to the one I had forgotten.

Losing Kodo, losing the Shinsengumi, even losing Kazama...

It was laughable. Those losses were not comparable to what I had already lost in the past.

I remember now, watching the strangers cut down the same people who braided my hair and sang songs with me. The same people who held me when I cried and loved me all the days of my earlier existence. I had watched them all die for not wanting to fight, for not wanting to hurt others. I remembered the blood that sprayed on my face and stained my clothes, blood from someone I loved so much it hurt even now to remember it, even though I had forgotten who they were. How different that had been than to have the blood of strangers on one's face. I remembered Kaoru's steel arms trapping and protecting me as he carried me away to safety, his heart beating alive and vengeful in my ear...

We had been so young...

I was glad no one was there to see my face. Surely, at that moment, I could have inspired the same fears that Kazama so easily inspired in his enemies.

All of that pain, and for what?

For the humans' need to conquer? For their thirst for power and wealth, for fame and fortune? All this time I had defended them, I had even fought for the Shogun under the Shinsengumi. I had helped the Tokugawa, the very people who had torn away all that I held dear.

No wonder Kaoru hated me. He has probably hated me since that first time he caught me in Okita's presence. No wonder he wanted me to suffer. I had abandoned him, betrayed him and forgotten him. Here, before me now, was the person who had loved me when I was young, the person who had saved me when everyone else had been torn from us, and I had rewarded him with only more things to be bitter over. In my forgetfulness, I had left him to deal with his mounting sufferings by himself and all he had left, all he could do, was tend to his hatred so that he could survive. Unlike me, he never found someone to love

him, even if it were pretend. Unlike me, he did not, could not, forget.

We were not the same coin when we met again. We shared the same face but everything else we had held together I had simply let go of in the bright care of Kodo's love. Kodo, who had sold both of us out to the Tokugawa to live, and all I had been able to do was thank him for his _sacrifice_.

Kodo who had gone to the enemy, worked for them and then continued on to work for more humans, betraying our race with his every breath...

Perhaps, the madness he gave to the Shinsengumi was a type of atonement for what he was doing. Yet, even now, for the first time, I was truly glad that Kazama had cut him down. To work for the humans, the very ones who had killed my family and then to seek them out again at the end of the war so he could gain favor, was unforgivable.

I was unforgivable.

I rose, and all I felt was hatred. It was a burning thing inside of me. I wanted to tear the world apart, tear this horrible country and its horrible creatures apart with my bare hands. Their indifference gulled me, their desire to use the demons fed the fire of hate inside of me until I wanted to-

A twig snapped and I sharply turned my head, my face must not have been very different from an animal's then. Kaoru stood there and when he saw me looking like that, he smiled. Here was probably the expression he had been searching for all along. There was no fear in him as he stared at me while I remained wrapped in the darkness of my memories. After all, he shared it with me. Looking at me, he must have felt that, at last, I was myself again.

"So," he said, for the first time looking tired. "You remember."

"We didn't want to fight. We just want to live in peace... But the humans came anyway. They killed everyone... We hadn't done anything!"

I could feel the hate and anguish stir in my breast again as the words came out. My dream was not just a dream. He knew all of this, but I had to say it. My words, they seem to stir him from his weariness.

"They killed us for wars and their pride! Parents, children... everyone! They killed them all and they didn't even care!"

I had not wanted to hate humans. Some of them were bad, true, but there were many more who weren't. And where were the good ones, a voice in my head asked, on the day those humans massacred your family? When I looked at Kaoru then, I wondered too where the demons were as well.

Where were the ones who could have saved us?

"I can't even make sense of my own feelings," I finally said, trying to calm down. Dimly I remembered Kazama's face. I remembered Sen's

smile and Amagiri and Kimigiku's wry humor and loving dedication. I remembered the Shinsengumi, even though they should have been the enemy. Finally, the faces of those men who had tried to help me managed to take the edge off of the hate still burning inside of me, threatening to eat me alive.

Yet, as soon as I acknowledged it, the hatred I felt for humans flowed in my veins, gripped at my chest, and pounded against the inside of my skull again. I'd never felt anything like it before. Even as I struggled, the hate drove out everything else. I could feel my mind begin to slip-

"I see that you have finally remembered everything." Kaoru faced my hatred, a sad smile on his face.

He was still smiling, but his eyes were cold. "Do you understand the truth now? Nothing's fair. There's no justice. This world rewards the foolish and the vicious, and punishes the weak and innocent!" He spat out the words in disgust and frustration. There was a time when I would never have understood him, but I was no longer that person.

"Our home was destroyed by the humans, wasn't it?" I asked. Even now I could smell the fire. Having helped Amagiri and Kimigiku burn the corpses made that dream all the more real.

"We were ordered by the western domains to fight for them, but when we refused, saying we wanted peace and not war..." His eyes were wide and sunken, like the sockets of a skull again. I had seen that look before. "We were slaughtered."

"Like animals," I echoed.

Kaoru smiled at me then, a smile I had not seen since my dream. His misery and rage were all too easy to understand. "And now at last your comfortable, pleasant life is over, and you understand the unrelenting cruelty of reality." His smile looked somehow tired, and he stared off at some invisible point in the distance as he spoke. "Now, we are finally equals."

I almost thought I saw his shoulders sag with relief. "The misery I endured for so many years, you have experienced in a fraction of that time. You understand what I suffered, and so I no longer have any reason to hate you..." He looked at me then and I realized how lonely he must have been without me, the other half of his set. "Once I return home, I plan to revive our clan. I will take back the life that was stolen from us."

"You mean to bring back the Yukimura clan?" I asked, surprised.

He nodded.

"But not before I bring justice to all those who did their best to destroy us! The western demons, living fat off the slaughter of their kind; the humans who infest this country..." His eyes burned with hate. I shared Kaoru's pain, and so his rage didn't frighten me. It affected me no more than my rage had affected him. I felt only sadness for him then, and sadness for myself.

The cycle was finally complete. I had found myself becoming a part of

it. I had not understood my role in it, but now it was clear.

"With Kodo's improved Water of Life, we can create a whole army of furies that don't lust for blood nor fear the sun. Even those from weaker demonic lineages could regain their strength through the Water of Life! We will found a kingdom of our own!" It explained why I had only felt slightly tired in the day but had neither felt a lust for blood nor that I was truly weaker.

Then again, strength had never been what I was good at. That could change though, I thought as I looked down at my clawed hands. I had not bothered to change back to the girl I had been before Kazama left me, before the memories came back of the past I had lost.

"We'll destroy anyone who stands in our way, and carve out a part of this country where we can live." If Kodo had indeed removed the side effects of the Water of Life before his death, and I had seen it with my own eyes, then such ambitions were certainly within our reach.

I don't know how I looked but I was smiling when I met Kaoru's eyes. "Yes," I answered from the part of me that I had abandoned and betrayed long ago. "Somewhere where the humans will never have the power to take away our most precious things," I finished for him.

Kaoru was in front of me again, but this time there would be no more pain or fear. Instead, his hands cupped my face gently and I looked up to him, this person whose visage was a reflection of my own. Here was my other half, the only one in the world who could truly understand all that I had lost.

I had finally found him.

We were two sides of the same miserable coin, but together we will change that forever. Kazama's abandonment no longer hurt me as much, so long as I did not think on it. Kodo's death could not even touch me anymore.

I was a phoenix rising from the ashes.

I was the girl I had discarded and forgotten so long ago.

I was myself again.

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><p>To be continued...

14. Chapter 14

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

* * *

><p>Chapter 14

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><p>I stopped counting the days. Instead, I only remembered that we had gone, hand-in-hand, back to my old home. Kaoru never let go of me and I didn't want him to.<p>

However, when we arrived, Kaoru left me to my own devices. He knew I would want to reacquaint myself with the place. So I walked the fields by myself, the same one that were filled with the flowers from my dreams. Around me they wavered, showing their last bloom before winter. I found that I still loved them and their scent made me smile. I sat quietly, feeling the breeze on my cheeks and watching the sky becoming red.

I was at peace with my decision.

No screams bothered me here, not even the memories.

I weaved two flowered wreathes and went back to Kaoru with a bouquet in my hands. I placed the one I made for him on his head and gently kissed his cheek. "I'm home," I told him with a smile as I pulled back.

Kaoru blinked at me, surprised by my action. He touched his cheek first and then reached up with shaky fingers to caress the wreath on his head. Slowly, afterwards, a flush came over his pale face and for the first time since we reunited I saw him truly smile. "Welcome home, little sister," he said warmly.

It was an awkward smile, as if he had almost forgotten how to do it.

I was wrong then, not so long ago, when I had thought I knew his heart.

At that time, it was I who had not known my own.

I made us dinner in a kitchen covered by ivy. I noted the things that needed changing to make the place livable again, making a list in my mind. When dinner was ready, I went to find my other half, and we sat down quietly, eating and enjoying each other's company.

How strange, I would not have thought this possible but a few days ago. I laughed at the thought and told Kaoru what I was thinking. He smiled a shy, wry smile and I knew it would all work out in the end.

It was going to be alright.

Finally, I was home.

I don't know why I allowed myself to relax into that, even for a second, even if only to savor it. I knew Kazama better now than most, even if I refused to think about him. I had pulled him into this and he would not rest until Kaoru was stopped.

I was sitting outside, looking at the stars with Kaoru after dinner. I hummed a song we used to sing together, swinging my legs in the air. He started to join me as we sipped tea, smiling at each other as our voices mingled. It was easy to forget then that Kaoru wanted to destroy the world, that he wanted to build an army of furies. With

the lights in his eyes, it was like we went back in time. Yet, that was when Kazama came for us. Amagiri followed behind, a shadow trailing after his lord. Sen and Kimigiku were nowhere in sight. I was glad, a part of me did not want my friends to see me like this.

Especially not Sen...

But it was a small part of me and I have learned to ignore it.

Kaoru and I rose to watch them near.

"Do you think you can convince him to go?" Kaoru asked me. He wouldn't have if he hadn't been in such a good mood. If he hadn't found himself loving me again I doubt he would have asked me at all. I understood how he felt, because it was easy to love him back, because we were the same, him and I.

I shook my head. "No," I told my brother. "He wouldn't leave us until we're dead."

I guess, at that moment, I knew. Like the Shinsengumi, I was desperate. When Kazama said those words to me months ago, I had been defiant. I had, in fact, been insulted he would call the Shinsengumi's will to do what was right a desire to find a place to die.

But here I was, doing exactly that.

I never had the illusion otherwise, even with the hatred drowning all thoughts and all reason the morning Kaoru found me. I had always known how this story would end. I had known when I had decided to tell Kazama the truth of what I was even though a part of me wanted him to deny it, needed him to tell me otherwise. Yet, he had walked away, as I knew and feared he would. It was easy then to see the course I would take. The dream that came changed nothing. In fact, it made the decision even simpler.

Kaoru drew his katana. It would not serve him here, I knew, but I did not stop him. Instead, I mirrored him and drew my wakizashi. It would serve me even less, but it did not stop me either. I felt the change take over me and I knew then that my eyes were gold and my hair was white. There was no going back, not since Kaoru came for me in my father's study. I just had not known at the time that the future I wanted was already out of reach.

I wondered then how we looked to them. Twin faces with twin expressions. The same two parts of a whole set. In the end, we will always be two sides of the same coin.

I looked to Kazama and saw him glow, pale and bright in the moonlight. My heart clenched at the gold of his eyes and the white of his hair. He was not mine anymore, I told myself over and over, each painful word and not one I could deny. He never was.

He did not move at the sight of our fighting stance. Kazama never did anything that was not at his own pace. Instead, he watched Kaoru, his mouth grim but his stance relaxed and his gaze never turning my way. I wasn't fooled for a second how dangerous he was. Watching him, I realized that I had never seen him avoid me so assiduously, as if I

had already died those nights ago when I had broken both our dreams with the truth of my situation. Yes, perhaps to him that was what had happened, and the thought would have made me laugh bitterly if it weren't more likely to make me cry.

I did neither.

Kaoru smiled then at Kazama, fearless and strong. He had not seen, as I had, the clean silver arc of Kazama's blade cutting my father down. "For our dreams," Kaoru promised me then, "I can do anything!" He didn't wait for my reply, his only advantage would be surprise and he launched himself at Kazama. He was so fast that for a moment he seemed to have disappeared before my eyes. Then he was on the other side of the wide field, Kazama's sword blocking his swing with almost a lazy slight of hand. Kaoru never saw me smile at his back. My face must have been so sad that Amagiri could not hide the pity he felt for me as he watched me mirror my brother's move.

Grass flew in the wake of my foot-steps.

Kazama didn't even blink and their swords clashed again and again, sparks flying. I realized then how strong Kaoru truly was. I could not have lasted a second against him. Seeing him fight Kazama seriously, I felt pride at what he could have been if life had only been kinder to the both of us. But his strength, his speed, and his skill would not be enough to save him.

Kazama didn't bother to look my way even as I flew towards them. What was I to him now? I wondered as I neared. A ghost? A lost chance? I was obviously, however, not a threat. Not a future...

In a way, he had always known me better than I knew myself. This time he did not bother to ask me for my permission.

"Where were you?" I heard Kaoru ask in his pain-filled, hating voice. "Where were you when our family was cut down? Where were the other demons then?" His fury and frustration grew until I could no longer follow his attacks or Kazama's parries. Yet, each time Kaoru attacked he was repelled back.

Kazama did not even bother to look affected by those words, much less guilty. With another seemingly lazy swipe, he pushed my brother back again, a move that was harder and fiercer than before. Kaoru slid, leaving a path in his wake as broken pieces of grass flew between Kazama and him. He was so focused on Kazama and the rage he felt, he never realized that I was suddenly behind him.

It was, in the end, not Kazama's sword that felled Kaoru. A dark red stain spread across Kaoru's shirt and he looked down now that he had come to a complete stop. He wobbled a little unsteadily, not quite sure what was going on. Kazama straightened and watched us. I knew he had only blocked Kaoru's attacks because he had known what I had planned. He always knew and he had allowed this to happen the way I needed it to.

"Wh-what?" Kaoru managed to mutter, forgetting for once his rage and his vengeance as his face became young and perplexed. He tried to lift his hand to touch the spreading red stain on his shirt, and then his hand dropped, his heart quivered, and he slumped still.

I stood behind my other half, supporting his weight with my own, letting him rest against the hilt of my wakizashi. The blade had pierced Kaoru in the heart, I had made sure of it. He didn't even have the time to realize what was really going on, only that Kazama's force had pushed him onto something hard and sharp. I wondered if he had enough time to realize it had belonged me and hoped that he hadn't.

Through my kodachi, I had felt his heart shudder to a stop, unable to heal the wound I inflicted.

No, it was not the same as it had been with Kodo who was mad. Who did not love me and wished only to use me. Who was killed by Kazama to spare me this pain.

My brother was truly my missing piece, a part of me. He had truly wanted to protect me, share with me, love me and be loved by me. I had remembered what it had been like to lose everyone else that I had loved, like he had known for all the years that had separated us and more. He had come for me then, unafraid and willing to share again, willing to hold my hand when all I had felt was blackness and loss that blotted out who I was. I had done what I did because I could not bear for him to see my face when I did my duty. I would never want him to feel so betrayed again... not by me. I also could not bear to let anyone else do this thing to the one who looked exactly like I did, who I loved so much... He should not have died by anyone else's hand, least of all by Kazama's. Kazama who had once held this same looking face and had been so gentle should not have such memories tainted by this. I pressed my forehead to a back that might as well have been my own and hid the smile that held no joy, crying my tears so silently as to not make a sound.

Now, I was truly alone.

Kaoru's body slumped against me, gravity pushing his heart against my blade all the deeper as he fell backwards. We slowly tumbled, the two of us, sliding on to the grassy ground beneath our feet.

"Chizuru," Kazama said with such aching softness my name that I could not look at him right away. The breeze was cold against my wet cheeks and my audience stayed silent as he watched me close unseeing eyes. He didn't need to say more. My name sounded warm and comforting when he had uttered it earlier. His voice had been filled with all the things I had no claim to but still wanted so much.

I shook a little at the memory of my name on Kazama's lips, masking it with a laugh. Even now I react to him, I thought despairingly. Bitter could not have described how it must have sounded. "Kaoru was my responsibility," I finally answered without any harshness, when I had finally regained some control over myself. It was as much of a thank you to Kazama as I could manage. I gently held Kaoru to me in my trembling arms, remembering his fading warmth and the boyish look on his face when hatred did not cloud it. The sky was full of stars overhead, bearing witness, but I did not look up to meet their unaffected gazes. After all, not one of them had ever granted me a single wish that I had made for all the things that I wanted.

What does it matter now? I had made my choices knowing what they meant. I had been at peace with the path I chose.

Kazama sheathed his sword and I finally found the will to look at him with my head tilted. His hair was golden again, his eyes red like fire. "I am also a fury, Chikage," I reminded him then, daring him. The pain in my heart gave me false courage but courage nonetheless. "Should you not stamp all of us out in case we lose our way?"

After everything, surely he had not forgotten my tainted blood, but Kazama did nothing more than look at me. His perfect face made each breath I breathed more agonizing than the last. He was so close I could have reached out and touched him, but touch did not mean have and presence did not mean forever.

Finally, I was the one to look away, tightening my grasp and gathering Kaoru close to my broken heart. Two sides of the same coin we had been, all of our lives, even the parts I had forgotten him in. Even now, his face reflected my own. In the end, I had not wanted him to know what I had meant to do from the start. In the end I had wanted him to turn to me in our song and pull me close. I had wanted him to tell me, "This is enough. This is what I had been searching for." I had wanted him to call me little sister with his warm affections and share my forgotten tears. I wanted him to hold my hand tightly so we could both let go of the past, together. But Kaoru had smiled at me instead with his forgotten smile and asked me if Kazama would stop his dreams of vengeance and I had told him the truth. Even then, he didn't deserve the knowledge of my betrayal.

He had suffered enough.

Every dream, I thought, I had watched every dream end in such painful ways.

Amagiri's voice came through then, weary and kind. "I don't think she's a threat," I heard him say to Kazama. So gentle he sounded, I did not know which of us he meant to comfort. But, he was not comforting me. He was cursing me with his compassion by allowing me to live.

Still, I could not help but agree with him silently.

I was never a threat.

Without Kaoru, I was only half a ghost of the past. I was the ghost of all the wrongs done here to the Yukimura clan. Not a vengeful ghost like Kaoru had been, but the sad one that cries at night and can never be happy again.

And you, Kazama, I thought as I looked up once more to meet his unwavering stare. You do not have the strength to kill me.

But it was not an accusation and I did not voice it.

Instead, I smiled up at him, the way I could not before. With my brother growing cold in my arms, I repeated the same words I had said, not so long ago. "I release you from your promise, Chikage." We both knew which promise I meant. This time I did not rush into it with pain or desperation. This time I meant every word of it and I wasn't waiting any longer for him to contradict me. It was all over, long before now. It was over when Kaoru had stabbed me in my father's study, but I did not know it then. It was over when the river reflected my true face back at me, but I could only deny it then. My

dreams with Kazama had ended but only now was I able to accept it. I could not change the past no matter how hard I tried or how I wished for it. Stars could not grant me my wishes and Kaoru showed me how twisted I could become if I failed to let it go.

So, unlike the last time, I did not cry.

This time I also did not wait for Kazama to go. Instead, I rose again, and with my demon strength I took with me my brother's dead body. This time I was the one to walk away from what was now only impossible wishes. My feet carried Kaoru and I from that field with the tiny flowers I loved and the demon who held all the unattainable happiness that a promise could not give me.

I never looked back, as Kazama had not done when he had left me those days ago. After all, I was a ghost returning to the place she had already died in long before now. In my arms I carried the remains of the past as an offering. I would bury Kaoru here, where he must have always wanted to be. Here, where all that we had both loved fiercely had been lost, forgotten by one half and remembered bitterly by the other. Here, we have returned, the two of us finally reunited. The world needed no more furies any more than it needed a tainted demon...

Kodo and Kaoru were both dead, joining the people I had loved in my childhood. The Shinsengumi was also dead. Kondou, Inoue, Hijikata... I did not know all the fates of the Shinsengumi captains, but I had lost them all regardless, to the unrelenting tides of time and war. These men who taught me how to be brave and to face the things one must do, despite the costs, was why I had found within myself the will to see my decisions through. There was only me now. I wished then that I had died with them. I wished that so many loved ones had not obligated me to live by protecting me, saving me from what they had thought was the crueler fate.

What difference did it make? In the end, I still could not continue the Yukimura line. In the end, I could not be with my friends who I loved. In the end, I became like this.

After Kazama and Amagiri had quietly departed and after I finally finished digging a grave for Kaoru, I buried him by our old house. When that was done, I built a small fire at its feet and burned my father's notes, watching the ambers and ash float into the sky. I said a little prayer for Kaoru then and left a flowered wreath on his grave before turning in to go back to the house by myself.

I watched the sky began to light from the same place Kaoru and I had sat but hours ago. My eyes watched the last stars fade, until dawn came bright and cool. Not one tear fell and not once did my vision blur. It seemed that I was out of all the childish tears and childish hopes that used to break my heart.

Now I waited, in the quiet, cold morning, with only myself for company. I waited for something that would not come for me for a long time yet. I would wait, in this place I had once called a home, with the singing birds and the wavering grass. I could almost still feel Kaoru's presence, in the half-filled cup sitting next to mine. I could almost faintly hear him in the back of the house, looking for snacks and turning to call for my help...

Here, I had finally found my own place to die.

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><p>To be continued...

15. Chapter 15

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

* * *

><p>Chapter 15

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><p>It would take a while, but I would make this small house into a home. Some of the work had already been done by my father who had stayed there briefly, and then by Kaoru who was starting to plan out how to make it the castle for our kingdom. I had no such ambitions, so it would not be long before it became a house cozy enough to live in through the long winters and the cooler summers.<p>

The fall ended and winter came and went.

I finished patching the house up, though sometimes rather clumsily before the first snow hit. I lived in my little house full of long forgotten memories and spent most of the evenings finding wood. While I did not like the cold, it did not harm me. I had taken down the ivy and cleared out the small animals that made their nests in my old home and patched what I could up with what was available.

It was not easy, that first winter, but I was a demon and not a human. I survived it. Sometimes, I wished terribly for the voice of a friend, but slowly, slowly I found that the memories were enough... so long as I held on to only the good ones.

I got into the habit of humming to myself and singing sad and cheery little songs. Some of them I had learned from Kodo, some I used to sing with Kaoru and the village children, and some had come from festival days in Edo and then Kyoto, when Harada and Shinpachi would sneak me out, holding my hands in theirs as we rushed through the crowds after their duties. There had been so much laughter and shouting then, and I was grateful to them for giving me such warm things to relive in my solitude.

I lived quietly and peacefully, the way I had once longed for, though perhaps this was not how I had ever pictured it. I never asked for anything anymore, knowing they would never come true. I only lived, day to day, trying to remember the good things about the past and being satisfied with the small comforts of what remained of my life. After how hard everyone tried to keep me alive, I had no right to end it early and I had no right to be unhappy.

Then spring came, after the snow receded, green and beautiful. With it, the warm breeze brought me my first visitor. The knock was unexpected, but when I opened the door my eyes widened in surprise

and joy.

"Sen!" I gasped, a bit too loudly but I didn't care as I gathered her to me. Then I froze and pulled back, looking down at the bump between us. For a moment I felt a pain in my heart so sharp that my eyes watered and I had trouble hiding it. But it passed and a smile was back on my face when our gazes met. "Congradulations!" I told her and meant it, but I was too scared to ask her who the father was.

We chattered over tea, as if no terrible decisions had ever separated us. We laughed and cried. I showed her Kaoru's grave and leaned my head on her shoulder. We stood out in the chilly air for a long, quiet moment before I dragged her back into the house and cheerfully forced hot tea down her throat.

Not long after, she straightened as she looked outside, as if she felt something calling her before turning back and smiling at me. "I have to go," she said quietly, if not a little regretfully.

"Alright," I replied. I did not ask. Why ask after painful things? I was happy she had come at all. I walked her to the door and there, I paused. "Thank you, Sen," I told her with all of the love I felt for her.

Since we met she had always been my one true friend.

Sen looked back at me, her face sublime and her smile warm and sincere, just like I remembered her. In fact, with the child inside of her, she seemed to glow even more warmly and happily. "No, Chizuru-chan," she said to me with a shake of her head and love in her eyes. "Thank you."

We embraced for a long moment and then she finally pulled away, quietly leaving through my door. I wanted to watch her go, but I also did not want to see who was waiting for her on the edge of those woods. If it was not just Kimigiku by herself I think I might have cried.

I was so strong now. I didn't want to cry anymore. So I closed the door quietly and went back to my life.

Sen visited only two more times, bringing books and paper, some clothes and a variety of spices that I could not grow in my small garden behind the house. Finally, she was getting too pregnant to visit and she promised she would come again after the baby was born. She was still grumbling about it as she headed out the door, but I could only laugh at her waddling walk. "Goodbye," Sen said to me, her eyes searching my face as if she was trying to remember me.

"Goodbye," I replied and then I touched her belly and felt the baby kick. We grinned at each other. "Goodbye," I said to the unborn child.

Whoever this child will become, he or she was very lucky to have Sen for its mother. This time, even though I was afraid, I watched Sen disappear into the woods. No one came out to get her and I was glad for their thoughtfulness before I closed my door.

Then I was alone again, and it was alright.

Summer passed and fall followed. Sen did not come to visit me again. I missed her laugh, but I held to the memory of it and it was enough. A quiet, respectful knock came before winter began but when I opened the door there was no one there. I looked down and saw a trunk and a sack left at my doorstep. I pulled both in and examined it. The sack held food and sake, rice and spices. Sen must have known I was running out so she had it delivered. The trunk surprised me, for in it I found some of my old clothes, as well as some new clothes and a few more books.

Sen, I thought with a smile, must have asked someone to drop all of this off. Considering its weight and the discretion of its delivery, I guessed it was Amagiri. I was a little glad for it, because my own clothes, most of which Sen had brought to me before she stopped visiting, were getting a bit thread-bare.

I went to a small nearby lake and took a cold bath. When I got home, I was shivering but clean. For the first time in a long time I slowly dressed myself in my old kimono. I went through the motions that were familiar to me when I was girl from Edo, before her father left for Kyoto. In the small mirror Sen gave me, I brushed my hair out carefully and dressed it into something that reminded me of Kaoru, the first time I ran into him in Kyoto.

Standing in the house by myself, I found a package in my trunk that I had overlooked earlier. Curious of this seeming gift, I untied the rough strings that held it closed. The flap opened and I gasped as I saw the red silk tumbling out. My hand shook as I carefully lifted the sash from my clothes, and there I found a wet spot on it that surprised me. Then, slowly, I let the material fall back again. My fingers trembled as I reached up and touched my cheeks, realizing then where the moisture had come from. I blinked and more fell. I remembered so clearly suddenly, Sen's excited, laughing voice echoing in my ear, her arm around my own. "Isn't this better? Being able to shop for someone you like?"

For the first time by myself in my little house, I sat down in the kimono I had not worn for years and held the sash I had thought reminded me of his eyes. I grieved then, for that girl I was no longer. I grieved for the dreams she had when she had forgotten her other half. The dream that, even now, seemed so beautiful... But, it was a dream that could never be.

Just this once... I promised myself.

So I did not swallow the tears that fell, gold and red they shone from fire and silk. Instead, in each drop I finally let out each naive hope and unanswered wish, letting them quietly descend like the leaves of autumn outside my house. It had been a dream so warm and full that my heart ached at containing its memory, even though I had denied it until now. "Chikage," I whispered his name softly to myself. My voice carried with it the longing for all the happiness I had always known he could have given me if we'd only been given the chance. "Chikage," I repeated again, unable to help myself despite my heart falling to pieces again at the onslaught of memories. It was both painful and sweet to allow myself this one brief moment, reliving the past that I had put away and grieving for each cherished piece as I took them out...

Yes, we could have been happy. I admitted as I inspected each warm, remembered touch and teasing, exchange of words.

We could have been so happy...

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><p>To be continued...

16. Chapter 16

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

* * *

><p>Chapter 16

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><p>Another winter came and went. Spring warmed the green meadows and my favorite flowers began to bloom. I often found myself making flowered wreathes to wear, leaving one for Kaoru in the mornings when I greeted him and the new day. I would spend clear, warm days like this watching the blue skies pass by overhead. Sometimes I would play a game to guess the shapes of the clouds and then I would let myself nap away the afternoon.<p>

In my ears, faintly, I could almost hear Kaoru's voice when he had been my brother, long ago, telling me fantastical stories for each animal I picked out. Sometimes he would point to a cloud and call it something I have never heard of before. I remembered slowly, in those quiet, sunny days, his smiles and cheer, his imagination and humor. Things that Sen sometimes reminded me of, things I had forgotten about him and he must have surely forgotten about himself.

It was in this manner that Kazama found me. His shadow came over me as I was tracing a rabbit overhead. At first I didn't realize who he was, having seen only his shadow. I jumped up and turned to him, not sure if I should be expecting Sen or an attack, or Sen.

Instead, Kazama looked back at me quietly. I stared at him in shock, forgetting for a moment how to speak. And then, suddenly I was sharply aware of how my kimono was a little skewed from me twisting off the ground too fast. I could feel how the flower wreath in my hair was crooked, half hanging off of my head. I reached up with fumbling hands and straightened it. When I was done I saw the flash of laughter shining in his eyes before he masked it.

He was laughing at me!

The nerve!

I almost growled at him. It had been awhile since I interacted with anyone, I feared my manners were probably a little rough around the edges by now. It took me a moment longer than I would have liked to get my temper back in check. "Chizuru," he acknowledged me as if I

were the guest instead of him, looking seriously and imposingly down at me. I straightened my back at this. It wasn't going to fool me and it definitely was not a proper hello, but I guess it was as close to one as I was going to get out of him.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" I asked stiffly instead, hating my breathless voice and not really wanting to hear his answer.

"Sen told me you needed company," Kazama answered evenly.

I swallowed.

I guess I am not the only one on a first name basis with Kazama anymore. I stared at him not sure where to go from there. "Aren't you going to invite me in for tea?" he asked pointedly, as if I was being unnecessarily rude.

I frowned at him then and tried not to sniff. "Follow me," I said and turned without bothering to check if he was actually following. I made tea and discretely straightened my kimono while in the kitchen. He didn't comment but I knew he noticed when I came back with the tea I promised. We sat in a long, awkward silence. If this had been Sen's idea, and I knew it was, then it was probably the worst idea she has had in a long time. I silently fumed as I drank my tea and stared at everything in the room except my uninvited guest. I silently vowed that I wasn't going to make this easy for him.

"How are you?" Kazama asked me at last, breaking the silence. He was really terrible at small talk. I was surprised that he was making an effort. Usually, Sen would have had me laughing by now and feeling at ease, glad for the company of another to brighten my lonelier days. Kazama's conversation just made me want to go back to the kitchen, block the door so he couldn't follow and, for once, be sincerely grateful for the lack of company. In fact, I was tempted to do just that, never coming out again until he decided to end both of our miseries and leave the premises.

"I'm good," I answered politely. It was not far from the truth. This was the most at peace that I've been since I had left Edo to look for my father. True, I have also never been lonelier, but everything had its price. "How have you been?" I asked expressionlessly in return. It was an automatic gesture and I regretted the words as soon as I uttered them.

I didn't want to know.

I didn't want to hear if Sen bore his child. I didn't want to learn that he was happy without me. I didn't want him to divulge what brought him here. And I certainly didn't want to know when he would go. It hurt so much to sit in his presence that it was all I could do not to squirm. I had forgotten how intense his eyes were, how much his smile could make my heart quake, and how much I missed him.

I would have done well to not remember any of it but it was already too late.

Up until now I had even succeeded in not thinking about him except for the occasional, unintentional pang. I had tried, at first, to remember him fondly but the exercise was simply too depressing. Eventually, I simply realized I needed to stop thinking about him at

all, but his current presence destroyed the wall I had spent the past few years building to protect myself.

So, here he was... Unapologetic and in the flesh. Back to torture me.

Apparently, Sen somehow thought this was a good idea.

Even knowing this I couldn't be angry with her. Sen had always had my best intentions in mind. Since we had first met she had been my friend, one who was always willing to lend a hand, despite the dangers that surrounded me. She knew me, perhaps better than anyone who was still alive and not Kazama. She was my one true friend. Whatever she had done, even if it was with Kazama, I knew it was because of her clan and her duties.

Perhaps, now, it was also because her heart as well...?

I did not want to think on it. Yet, I could also not begrudge her of that. I had done so much more and far worse in the name of clan and duty. Kaoru's grave was a physical testament to all the things I have done.

"I am well," Kazama's voice broke into my thoughts. "I have traveled all over Japan. I know now for sure that all the furies your brother had created are gone. Most of the humans who know about the furies also seemed to have met with some unfortunate accidents." I didn't need to ask for more details, I understood what he didn't say. Kazama was efficient at everything he did (and it certainly didn't help his personality that he knew this too).

Still, I blinked at him for what his words had meant. So, he had done something else for me again. I had not known. I had simply thought that he had gone on to fulfill his duties to his clan and had begun the process of forgetting the girl who could not help him achieve his goals anymore. It had been too painful to think rationally when it came to him, but I really should have known better. I set aside all my feelings then and rose to stand before him. "Thank you," I said to him with all the sincerity I felt and bowed deeply in gratitude.

I had, apparently, remained his responsibility, even after all this time. Then, before I could fully straighten and back away, Kazama's hands were suddenly on me, wrapping themselves around my arms. I found myself lifted up the rest of the way to face him and, when I straightened, I could do no more than look at him. His eyes met mine and they pierced into me, making me feel more than I thought I was capable of.

He was so close I could smell him. I had forgotten what he smelled like. Warm and dark and strong, like the woods Kaoru and I had traveled through to get here; like a summer evening full of stars.

I had not been this close to him in years. No, not since that perfect night in Ezo when the whole world had felt like it would soon be at my feet and I had been no more than a simple demon girl with a dream that hadn't seemed impossible. At that time I had not known that the place I was searching for was here... without Kazama beside me.

"Wh-what are you doing?" I asked. I wanted to jerk away. I needed to

jerk away. Here was Kazama, the person most likely to be the father of Sen's child. Here was the man I had loved and who I could never have. In this house, as the woman I was now, I had long realized I could never give him what he needed even if he was all that I wanted.

I thought I had laid this unsettling desire to rest, even though I had to bury it alive the night my brother died. And then, he showed up. Seeing him now, I could feel the emotion clawing its way out of its early grave and refusing to stay dead.

Even though my journey had allowed me to understand him better than anyone, it had only made it easier to love him. It allowed me to understand the true meaning of the duty the both of us had to bear. I could finally understand his contempt for mankind and his desire to secure the safety of the demon race at all costs. I understood all these things now as I had never understood them when I was that girl who had been kissed and was too insecure to ask for more. I wasn't that dreaming girl anymore, but my heart still loved him, all the more because of what I now know. Perhaps, because of what I chose, there would never be a chance for another to replace him.

Yet, had there ever been any other choices?

Looking back, I could not think of another road to take or another choice to make. Even though I loved him, even though what I chose at the end cost me all that I had ever wanted, what was between Kaoru and I had been more important. I could not allow any more furies to rip apart another's happiness. I could also not allow my brother to suffer the loneliness and hatred alone any longer, not after what I remembered. It had already driven him mad and I had been too late to save him as he had once saved me. Our two intertwined lives had both been at that edge and Kaoru had crossed over, beckoning me to join him because, always, we shared everything we could. Since the womb this had been true, no one else had the right to do what I had to do. Kaoru deserved no less. There had been no other choices then but I had still made it in the end.

With my own hands, I had ended Kaoru's life, the only life I would ever end again.

Kazama did not answer me as he watched the emotions flicker across my face. Instead, like he had done that day in Ezo, he leaned in and kissed me. It was a different kiss from the one we shared so long ago. This one was full of longing and sadness, of pained separations and heated, buried desires. I was no longer a girl and he was so much more than the boy who found me interesting...

In this kiss I relearned the Kazama I thought I knew, rewriting my memories of him. This time I closed my eyes and did not wonder at the length of his eyelashes. Instead, I let my hands clutch at the soft, silky strands of his hair that framed his perfect face. I did not study the smoothness of his skin either. Instead, I memorized him with my mouth, until there was only of him. There had always been only him.

When he pulled away, I could do nothing more than breathlessly look up at him. I felt again that ache inside of my heart that had never quite left me since we parted ways, though I had become good at ignoring it. I knew that the kiss changed nothing, that I still could

not have him in any way. "Chikage?" I whispered. All of my fears and all of my desires were in the sound of my voice when I said his name.

He did not answer me with words. Instead, he pulled me to him and buried his face into my neck. We stood there for a long time afterwards. He breathed me in and I held on to him. It was nice... warm and safe and bitter-sweet. It lasted until my stomach grumbled, breaking me from my haze. "Are you hungry?" he asked, pulling back with his eyebrow quirked in question and his face placidly innocent.

I blushed beneath his laughing eyes but instead of hitting him for enjoying my embarrassment, I frowned at him before I pulled myself out of his embrace. "I'll go make dinner," I declared and abruptly turned, trying hard to walk away with dignity. For a long time I stood in the kitchen afterwards, realizing what I had allowed to happen. I relived those moments over and over, unable to help myself. I touched my fingers to my lips, feeling the warm impression of Kazama's lips upon them. I could still feel his strong arms surrounding me, the heat of his own body pressed against mine.

Why was he here? How long would he stay? Could I really do this to Sen, my one true friend who I loved?

I had no answers so I dazedly went through the motions of making dinner, like I said I would. When it was done, I went out and served it to him. We ate it in silence and finally, after I cleared the table, I forced myself to voice the questions that should have been brought forth when he had appeared before me.

"Are you the father of Sen's child?" I asked him, looking him in the eyes.

"Yes," he said, "A girl. Sen named her Chizuru," he smiled at me ruefully. Apparently, I was not the only victim of Sen's good ideas.

I returned his smile, equally rueful but a little happy too, before I looked away. I couldn't hold his gaze.

A girl, I mouthed instead to distract myself. One named after me? A sweet pain bloomed in my chest. Oh Sen, I thought lovingly, you would do this for me, wouldn't you? I wondered what their child looked like, who the girl resembled more, and hoped, for one brief, tender moment that it was Sen.

My smile fell away.

"Why are you here then?" I could not face him for this next question. His answer would decide how this night would end.

Kazama waited me out. I knew he wanted me to face him when he answered but I couldn't. Even I was not that brave. "I came for you," he finally said to my profile. He said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Because you would not come to me, I came to get you." Even from where he sat, he must have seen how much his words hurt me. Those words had been a promise to another girl, one who could have given him what he needed years ago. But she was gone now and I was here in her place. "You cannot leave this place yet, so

I am staying here until you can."

I blinked. One tear and then another fell before I realized what he said. I turned sharply to him, my face perplexed and hopeful.

"Wh-what?"

"I have done my duties for both of our people, Chizuru. I have killed all of Kodo's, and then your brother's, abominations. I have also given the Kazama clan a pure-blooded child. A daughter, no less." Kazama smiled, proud but also tired. I have never seen this expression on his face before. I don't think he has ever let anyone see how heavily his duties weighed upon him. I have seen him express distaste often, but never tiring... Perhaps it had never truly been that until I had come along. "Now I just want to be with you." He said this gently, as if I were easy to scare. Then, slowly and deliberately, he reached across the small table separating us. He caught my trembling hand in his and when I finally moved to pull away, startled out of my daze by the contact, he would not let me go.

Yet, it was his words and not his touch that I could not believe.

"Who will protect Sen and your daughter?" I demanded, desperate for him to stop this farce and a little mad at him for abandoning them. While I could not prevent the hope from growing inside of me, it did not mean I would ignore what his decision meant. If he was going to hurt me, if he had not thought this through clearly, it would be better that he did it now than later. I do not think I could survive the later.

He looked at me, faintly smiling as if he approved of my defiance. "Amagiri will take care of them," Kazama said, his gaze slid to the lamp between us for a brief moment, dropping my gaze. His expression became thoughtful, as if he was remembering something good. "He's the one who actually have feelings for her."

My jaw dropped. For some reason this seemed to be the expression he was looking for. As soon as he saw it Kazama seemed to finally allow himself to relax. At last, he gave me one of his lazy, charmed smiles. It was the same one he wore whenever I did something especially amusing that somehow entertained him in some bizarre way. He leaned over, and with his long, elegant finger pushed my chin up and closed my mouth for me. "Careful, you don't want a fly to get caught in there," he said with a white and dangerous smile. His eyes were red and gold in the lamp light. In them I saw fire and heat and... promises.

"B-But I thought," I started, feeling his fingers trace my lips in that distracting way that made me glad I was sitting down. If I had been standing, I probably would have quite gracelessly collapsed on my floor. "I- I thought you wouldn't want me. I- I'm tainted." I whispered the last, painful word out.

Kazama frowned at me and his hand stopped but he didn't pull away. "If we were to have children," he said. "They will not be able to carry my name. It's true that you have been infected with fury blood... your brother made sure of that. However, you are also the last of the Yukimuras and you are here, where I have heard that the waters of your home may purify that taint." Something in his eyes was

suddenly a different type of dangerous even though his words remained calm and logical. I was certain then that he wished he had been the one to kill Kaoru, despite how he allowed it to end. "Since," he added casually, letting the moment go, "the Yukimura clan cannot afford to be as picky as my own, we will see." Sen must have told him about Kodo's research then. It might be true what Kodo had speculated at the end of his days, for I have not felt any side-effects. Much of it may also have been due to Kaoru using Kodo's perfected Water of Life formula. My brother had also infected me with his blood instead of the drink itself and that may have diluted it further. Even still, Kazama and I both knew that it would be a gamble for me to carry the bloodline forward after what Kaoru did.

I had consigned myself to remain alone till the end of my life because of this.

To have Kazama show up and be the one to suggest the possibility of children was a shock. Yet, here he was, ready to take that risk. Asking me to take the risk... even though if things were to go wrong it could destroy us in ways we could not even imagine now. I did not doubt for a second what Kazama would do if our children were born as monstrous and as uncontrollable as Sanan had been when he had first made his own version of Kodo's experiment. Knowing this, it was unlike Kazama to take such a risk. Or perhaps, it was because I had never dared to truly examine the depth of what he might have felt for me to have considered this moment possible.

I stared at him, searching for the thoughts he did not share and finding instead all the things about him that I had forced myself to forget.

Yes, he had done all the duties that obligated him to stay away from me, but there was this one thing left that neither of us could change. While the chance of a disaster was unlikely, its possibility was still there. But, if this was what he really wanted...

"I'm not your responsibility anymore, Chikage," I said to him as coldly as I could and straightened, trying to pull away again and failing miserably.

No! Asking him to stay was too much. I knew this when I had said my goodbyes the night Kaoru died. No matter what I wanted, I had to give him one last out, even if what I really should have done was ask him to leave. Unlikely as it was, letting him stay was the same as allowing myself to hurt him as none have done before, something I could never condone. After all, I would not be the one to kill our children if they were born as monsters. This even I could not do in the name of duty. If he stayed, that was what I would be asking of him. It was so much more selfish and cruel to let him do what he was suggesting then denying myself what he offered. Yet, even knowing this, the lump in my throat grew as he became more real and in-reach with each passing moment... and I could not form the necessary words to send him away.

"I have released you of all your promises to me. You don't have to do this. Would it not be better if you found another female demon who could be your wife and give you the children you desire? Someone who would be able to let you stay with your clan?" My voice shook and I had to stop. I wanted and needed to add, "Someone who would, for certain, not give birth to furies," but I could not even form the

words. This was as much as I could manage, even though so much more were needed to keep him safe. Those unspoken things sat like grounded glass on my tongue. I could neither swallow them nor spit them out even though the pain and my love demanded that I open my mouth and let it go.

Let him go... all over again.

It should be my duty to do this for him, I thought. He had done so much for me and, with each quiet, thoughtful action he had become more and more important to me. A red sash, how childish and laughable I had been to think it could have amounted to anything close to a thank-you. This was the one thing I could repay him with, but I could only tremble at the idea and remain mute with fear.

Was it so long ago that I had wanted him to leave? Why was it so easy to wrap his presence around me and long for more?

Kazama studied me in the lamp light. He didn't look bothered by my words or my actions. In fact, he wore the same expression he had when an army of furies got in his way. "You really didn't understand me when I told you female demons are rare, did you?"

I had met Sen and Kimigiku. Didn't they count? If I had the luck of running into two female demons when I didn't even know my own lineage what was so difficult with finding one more? Even Kimigiku, who was beautiful and untainted, would suit Kazama better than me. I had nothing to offer him except the possibility for more painful decisions down the road, unlikely but still a possibility. No. I couldn't do this to him. I loved him too much, more than the selfish voice in my head telling me to grab onto this chance. I loved him more than the fear of being alone and that soundless emptiness that came from the thought of losing him. Steeling myself against my own emotions, I gathered my courage and all the love I felt for him into my heart. Finally, I faced him and said all of the things I had held back to save myself. I looked back and dared him to deny my words, needing him to let me go.

I cannot make you happy, I thought, but I did not cry over it. For him, I will not cry.

When I was done, he was quiet. I felt the fear inch in as the silence stretched and it swamped me again, blotting out the strength I'd clung to. It was done. He would finally see reason now. This time I lowered my eyes because I did not want him to see me weaken. Instead, I held myself tightly against the dull pangs inside of me, knowing it would only grow. I will not cry, I chanted to myself over and over, trying to not feel lost. I had done it with a smile before, I had been brave before... surely I could do it all again. Yet, a small voice came instead of me and promised that, only when Kazama was gone would I let the tears fall.

Only then...

I tried to think of a song, I tried to remember the peaceful days of cloud-watching and flowers waving in the wind... but all I could feel in those memories was the absence of Kazama's presence. I had done what was right, what is right. This was what had made him like me from the start, but no... I had never been able to like myself for it. Duty was a harsh and bitter pill to swallow, no matter how many

times I did it. And love had never given me anything but pain and loneliness. Kodo. Kaoru. The Shinsengumi. And now Kazama...

Loving them had only allowed me to make the choices that I wouldn't have been able to without it. So why did I cling to this feeling that never gave me joy? Why did I allow it, again and again, to make me do the things I wanted least?

In that pain-filled world, I heard him over memories, sadness and heartbreak. "Even if there were as many female demons as there are female humans, I would still be here, Chizuru." His voice was so deep and so strong that I was pulled from the pit of darkness I had cast myself into. Without asking he once again reached for me, gathering me into his lap and anchoring me to him. I finally looked into those eyes again, eyes that could set me on fire and damn us both. He had thought it through, I realized then as I met the full intensity of his gaze. He allowed me to say the things I said because he wanted to make sure I understood as well. In the end, this decision could utterly break us both but he knew this too. He had wanted to see if I would turn my face away from the reality of it. I had not and perhaps that was why he had come back for me, because he knew I would never turn my face away from the reality of my decisions, no matter how much they hurt me.

This time, I was unable to deny the emotions I saw in his eyes. He would do this for me, even if I ended up hating him for it for a million years. The feelings he showed me by fire and moonlight now would not change for him no matter what was required of the both of us. Of all the people left in my world, he was the only one who could ever truly understand what was asked of him in this moment. He was the only one who understood the weight of this decision. He looked at the truth of that future with me unflinchingly; willingly grasping my hand and going forward. This was why he was here, despite everything it may cost him in the future. In the end, I could never turn from him when he had made such a choice, when he was willing to sacrifice so much just to be here beside me.

I am not impervious. I am not that strong. I was always just a little bit desperate and a little bit hopeful.

Suddenly, I wanted to laugh.

I wanted to laugh at the heart that had dared to doubt his resolve. I wanted to laugh at the woman who was not sure if he had thought things through. I wanted to laugh at the girl, waking up inside of me from being in his presence, the one I had to discard in his absence for the pain she caused me. She was back now, carrying with her the same fears and tears, the same hopes and joys, and holding so much more love than before that I could barely recognize her - myself. This may soon turn into a future full of bitterness and sadness, but I had learned that this one perfect moment now was worth it. Kodo, the Shinsengumi, and then Kaoru had taught me that this happiness was fleeting. Under the cold moonlit nights and with blades seeking valor and lost honor, they had shown me the way with both their successes and failures. Their parting was a pain so great that I had felt the weight of it ready to crush me. Yet, I had also spent time in their presence, when they had been warm and alive, full of love for me and dreams for the future. I had known them in many of their facets, some of which no one will remember them for, and I would not have traded even one of those moments for the absence of this pain living inside

of me now.

I wanted Chikage.

Since I had finally come to know him after I had finally come to know myself. I could not reject him. Not after this offer, when he looked at me with such clear eyes and with such warmth. At the end of the journey I had walked, it was always him I had wanted to share the last of my days with. Even though I had tried to forget him, even though our memories and the dream we had once shared had been too painful to ever hold for long in the aftermath, this was the one truth I could never deny.

I had accepted that I could never have him. This was the price of the choices I made, necessary as they had been. Yet, here he was, ready to prove me wrong again in the things I thought I knew.

Gently, this time, he was the one to let go of my gaze, but it was only so that he could truly press me to him. He had read me as easily as he would any book, and he nuzzled my neck as he tightened his grasp on me, sure of his victory. I smiled, knowing that this victory was also my own. I had seen in that brief moment of silence, while he had looked for my reaction, the same vulnerable uncertainty flit across his visage. He had allowed me to read him in return. He wanted me to know that I was not the only one who feared to let go of this dream.

And I would never be again.

I held dazedly still in his strong arms and felt his hot breath warm me. He held me to his solid, heated body, until all I could feel was him. He was so real, and no longer just an impossible wish. In that moment, slowly and just as gently, I began to allow myself to forget how to deny him of anything.

"Chikage?" I murmured dreamily, my heart beating like it would burst.

Was that really my voice?

"Hm?" he answered, nipping my jaw and rumbling approvingly at my gasp as my fingers tightened on his arms.

"D-does this really mean... forever?" I asked breathlessly. So fragile was I at that moment that words could have shattered me.

He pulled back his smooth, elegant hand to gently caress the skin beneath my wide-eyed stare. His other hand moved down to my waist to firmly hold me close. "Yes, Chizuru," he answered as his forehead touched my own. "Forever," he promised, his words rumbling through me from the chest I was pressed against. The tone he used was the same indulgent one he had employed at Ezo, after he had kissed me for the first time underneath a pale, cold sky.

We had both changed since then, but this has not...

I felt the last of my tension leave me then. For the first time in a long time, I allowed myself to be happy. I gazed up at him as my body finally relaxed into his. Yes, I thought as I smiled up at him from the heart I had denied since I had found out I was a fury. Here was

the place I had been searching for since before I could remember. I reached up and wrapped my arms around him, love spilling out of me then in happy, salty trails. Yes, I admitted to myself as he kissed away my tears. How could I have forgotten?

Chikage had always been strong enough to be the type who kept his word.

* * *

><p>The End

17. Thank you for reading

****The Woods Are Dark and Deep****

by Blue Jeans

* * *

><p>Author's End Note

* * *

><p>Dear Readers,<p>

If you reviewed, thank you for taking the time to do so. If you finished the story and enjoyed yourself, that's what's important.

I do want to address a few things reviewers keep writing to me about. Warning, there will be spoilers as I have played everything in this game before writing this continuation:

1. Chizuru's demon blood is not a panacea, nor the foreign demon blood. It does not cure all ills - as was the case with Okita Souji, who still had TB after he drank the Water of Life. His lungs could just heal itself from the damage of the TB at a much faster rate - and that slowed down, or stopped, the disease from killing him.

2. Okita's route also showed - if you went to the bad end - that Chizuru can be effected by the foreign demon blood, from the Water of Life, after drinking it. If you went the route of Chikage, you'd also see that the effect is less intense if the formula was "perfected" but that it would still change her. Most of Chizuru's reaction to the Water of Life can be gleaned from Kaoru's reaction to the Water of Life in Okita's route and Koudou's in Chikage's (as well as other routes, but those two are the most prominent). Since Kaoru is Chizuru's twin, I'm pretty sure I can trust in his reactions to the Water of Life.

3. Sen's offer to Chikage to breed a pure-blooded child happened on Heisuke's route. I liked to think my tie-in to that had a bit more build-up. Look, I understand how people feel about it - because that was a bit of my own reaction when I read it on Heisuke's route. But, two things: 1) A lot more people, today, have kids with someone and then go marry someone else they love - it's called life after a divorce; this baby making business (and familial survival) was also kind of the main points of marriage, for longer than the idea of modern day fairytale romance, so I'm not really introducing a new

concept here. And 2) Since the Oni species seemed endangered and on the rocky cliff of dying off, which is strongly suggested in game, I doubt someone as duty-conscious as Chikage would abandon that sense of keeping his people and his bloodline alive for any personal reasons. Least of all to not hurt Chizuru's feelings. If he thought she wouldn't understand the meaning of duty, he would never have liked her, much less come to love her. She would have been no more use to him than a baby-making machine, and that wasn't what I was going for.

4. I'm still a bit baffled that people who are hung up about Chikage having a child for the sake of duty will be completely OK with Chizuru killing her own twin brother for the sake of duty. But, that could just be me.

So, for those of you who are really up in arms about this story, here's why I wrote it the way I did (and it isn't going to ever change):

1. Chizuru went through her ordeal with her twin so she could: 1) Remember where she really came from and how her life and happiness survived because of her total amnesia over the sacrifices made to keep her alive; and 2) So she could understand Chikage's burden. Chikage had the responsibilities of taking care of those he considered the last of his people and Chizuru had to experience some of that herself so I could treat them as equals in my story. Also, in my mind, killing your twin brother - the last member of your family/clan who was still alive - seemed a far worse sacrifice to make for duty's sake than having to produce a child to continue the species; but that's just my personal opinion.

2. Chikage could only fully respect and perhaps love someone who understood him. Chizuru's willingness to give up her own happiness for the safety of all, even those who would neither acknowledge or appreciate her efforts - i.e. lowly humans - would be someone that could actually catch his attention. It's that indomitable will to do the right thing, the honorable thing, that made him respect Hijikata and the rest of the Shinsengumi, despite their tainted blood and their icky humanness. It would possibly be the one thing that would make him do all he had to do in order to finally leave behind his people for Chizuru. At the end of this story, Chikage was basically saying: "I did everything I felt responsible for, and now I'm abandoning everything that meant anything to me to be with you." I was hoping I made the cost of his choice to be with Chizuru obvious (i.e. the possibility of having to kill his own children - as they did not have this thing called birth-control - as a pretty serious decision to make just to be with someone). It wasn't ideal, but I was amazed that some people chose to completely ignore it because she wasn't "The One" a la fairytale version.

3. Just want to emphasize that despite having one of the suckiest life possible (and Chizuru finally managing to understand that to some degree) Kaoru still had to be killed by his own sister, and that was the only kindness she could afford him. No one even mentions how much that must have sucked for both of them. It's all Chikage had a baby with Sen. Seriously, poor Kaoru. Even in the end, no one acknowledges how important he was. You know, he once saved the heroine from family/clan massacre... so we could write these stories. Remember that?

4. Finally, the main reason I wrote this story: To challenge the reader into thinking about how warped our ideas of romance have become.

I purposefully wrote the dichotomy between Chizuru's sacrifice for the sake of duty and the world, and juxtaposed that against Chikage's sacrifice for the sake of duty. While Chikage's sacrifice was more of the usual fare (as well as Sen's): Beget a child with someone you don't love, fulfill clan obligations one might not feel strongly about, etc.; I weighed that against Chizuru: A young woman forced to do a lot of things that was not only abhorrent to her but deeply went against all of her ideals (i.e. Confront the fury monsters that put her life in danger and could reasonably give anyone nightmares; confront the massacres her adopted father and twin brother had brought onto the world; forced into recalling the loss of her entire clan, and ultimately, culminating in the killing of her twin brother - the last person on Earth who truly shared her past - for the sake of duty and keeping a bunch of ungrateful humans safe.

While I'm annoyed by most people's reaction about Chizuru forgiving Chikage as being the only big deal worth noting in this story; I guess that was also the reaction I wondered if I would receive - one of the reasons I wrote this story. I just wanted women, especially young women, to ask themselves at the end of the story, who in the end really needed forgiving?

Was it Chikage, who betrayed no ideals of his own - he did not even betray Chizuru because they were not actually together when he had a child with Sen; or would you say that Chizuru was really the one who needed forgiveness in the end? After all, she was the one who felt responsible for the mass killings that was instigated by her adopted father and continued by her brother (as she is also the only one left to truly feel responsible for this). She is the clan head, and while modern thinking might believe her innocent, I doubt that a clan head can deny such responsibilities. On top of that, she killed her own twin; even though she was willing to give up everything else if only Kaoru would give up revenge as well. Chikage might have hurt Chizuru's feelings to fulfill his duties, but Chizuru's failure to stop her father and finally stopping her brother, caused death - mass deaths. She was also willing to give up Chikage for Kaoru, before Chikage ever left her. I suspected that some people would be bothered by Chikage's choices, but not to the point where his choices would completely eclipse Chizuru's. I wasn't even being subtle about the drama and conflict behind Chizuru's choices.

If Chizuru can live with herself after she killed her twin, who Life pretty much wronged at every turn; she can most definitely live with Chikage - a man who cleaned up her adopted father and brother's mess, did what he must for his people only to abandon them for her, and pretty much agreed to stick with her even if she had insane demon children - who he will kill to make sure they didn't harm other living things if she had them. This was someone who gave her the courage to do what needed to be done, even though she had not been prepared to do it with her adopted father at the start.

I also want to bring up the question about Sen's loyalty to Chizuru. If you were Sen, would you perhaps rather Chikage go and make babies with some other demon woman. There are consequences to that (despite the initial outrage): 1) Sen knows she is not in love with Chikage and Chikage knows he is not in love with her. Neither of them would

be hurt by the other's actions after the act and it is purely for the sake of duty. There is a clean break and both are willing to do what is necessary for the other to finish the duty they both need to fulfill to their people and, at the same time, eventually have a clean chance at happiness after their duties are fulfilled. If they went for other people, whose feelings were not as clear cut, other people's feelings may be hurt and there may be unforeseen consequences. 2) Sen choosing to do this means she was also, prepared from the start, to take on the responsibilities of raising the child Chikage would father out of duty. That's a responsibility she took over for him so he could go after Chizuru. That's a huge responsibility. Let's just say Sen wanted the child, she's still a young woman when this happened to her; and she had to have her baby pretty quickly to allow Chikage to wrap up everything on his end to leave. That's a huge sacrifice on her part - duty or not - just so her friend could have the man she loved back at her side, despite both sides stubbornness to do their duties in the most painful possible. 3) I wrote this story with the idea that she liked Amagiri as soon as she got to know him, and that was when they were under Chizuru's roof, after Chizuru got stabbed by Kaoru. So it's not like she did not have to give up on the possibility of maybe being with the guy she liked to have a baby with a guy she didn't. Put yourself in her shoes and see how that fits; maybe not so simple as "tried to steal Chikage away from Chizuru" is it?

And frankly, people don't belong to other people. People are not objects or property, no matter how literature and media may sometimes push us to think in such a primitive and simplistic way. While society have largely shaped and warped our ideas concerning love, marriage, and romance, frankly my story's main goal is to both entertain and make you aware the disturbing extremes we put on the importance of romance. It overshadows friendships, family, duty, and honor to ourselves. I don't want to define for you about how you should feel about Chikage and Chizuru's relationship, or even about romance and love, but I want to put more nuance on what it means to be with someone. What it means to choose someone to spend time, or even the rest of your life with. That the decisions are not just based on emotions, but a lot of sacrifice and compromise on both ends, without necessarily a promise of a happily-ever-after. Relationships are risks, and there are costs to that risk. I wanted to emphasize the friendship and the family relations as well. I did not want to overshadow their importance to Chizuru, despite her fierce desire to be with Chikage in the end. I hoped to point out, that had she the choice, she would have traded a lifetime with Chikage for a lifetime of peace with Kaoru, in a heartbeat with no questions asked, had the choice been there. He was her twin, so yes, he was at least as important as Chikage was to her, if not more so when she had killed him...

Anyway, enough ranting on my part. Until next time!

Best,

Blue Jeans

End
file.